

TO WIELD THE
DARKEST
NIGHT



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To those who wield their darkest nights, there is so much light in you.

Content warnings for 'TO WIELD THE DARKEST NIGHT' (nonextensive, may contain spoilers): Mature scenes, general violence, drug use, mentions of infidelity, mentions of execution, mentions of human trafficking, transphobia, deadnaming/misgendering of a transgender character, gender dysphoria, PTSD, SA (flashback), sexual trauma, risky sexual behavior, birth control, mentions of pregnancy, death of minor characters, grief, some AFAB language used for a trans man character during mature scenes.

Also By Beau Van Dalen

The Prince's Dearest Guards

The Prince's Dearest Guards

The Prince's Dreamy Gods

The Prince's Loving Guards

The Prince's Pretty Guards

The Prince's Gentle Guards

Warrior Of Hearts

ONLINE

Android Affection

Rogue Zero

Unveiling

MOONLIGHT

Dusk

Archer Of Time

Beloved Mentor

His Darling, Dangerous Count

White; and the colors you showed me.

It Was Winter

Underneath the counter of the old magic shop, huddled and hunched in over himself, Sol cries. He holds his knees close to his chest. The streets bustle outside. There is laughter in the air and snow falls, painting the streetsides an iridescent ivory blanket that reflects against the lantern light. The world is alive—but for Sol, all of it has been stripped of its usual color.

He is sleepless.

He is sleepless.

He is sleepless.

And soon, tomorrow comes.

I: Spring

6 Years Later

“I’ve been having visions.” Sol Sinclair stares back at his mentor, dead-eyed, a hollow hole blooming ‘round his ribcage. “Or, more so, I’ve been causing them.”

“And what do you see?” Androcles leans back into his wood chair.

The two of them sit in the middle of their quaint little *Great Tomes & Potions* shop after hours. Outside, crowds are still bustling, the light from the lanterns they hold bleed will-o’-wisp cobalt into the window, unto the floor.

“I see a sick King. A strange journey. Oddities, and an even stranger man.” Sol leaves out the details of the man’s taut muscles. The way the man fucks into him raw. How he calls Sol *Sol* and not Solange. “But,” Sol parts his lips, he lowers his eyes. “They could all be just dreams.”

“Are they bothering you?” his mentor asks.

Bothering... Sol lingers on the word for a moment. The visions do not trouble him, per se, but as they grow more and more defined over the years they awaken desires; things Sol had kept hidden deep inside his heart for decades. Sol fears the consequences of letting them consume him. He mustn’t.

Will not. “No,” Sol shakes his head with his fists firmly planted atop his knees. “They do not bother me. But I would rather they leave.”

“Then I recommend you stop mixing that special potion of yours with your herbal tea before bed!” Androcles shakes his finger at Sol. “It helps you find slumber, yes,” the elderly man barks out a laugh, “however it is well known to help you find other things, too!”

Sol forces a smile. He scratches at the back of his head. “I’ll consider it.”

As Androcles rises to his feet, he dusts off his robes and huffs. He peers at Sol again with a smile. “Good night, Solange. I hope you don’t mind it, if this old man leaves you to close up shop?”

Sol shakes his head. “Of course not, Androcles.” A numbing pang squeezes his chest, at the memory of his visions, now overlaid atop reality like a ghost he cannot gaze away from. “Good night.”

Sol stares at the ceiling. The fatigue of hiding himself like dust to be swept under rugs weighs on him—tonight especially. He huffs, tired and oh so ready to retire in turn, but his eyes widen when he tilts his head toward the window again.

As far as he is aware, Sol has not taken a single thing tonight that could explain this.

And yet, here he is.

Bearing the broadest shoulders in the land as far as Sol is concerned, his short blond hair slicked back and framing aged but brave features—passing by the little potion shop, the man from Sol’s slumber appears.

* * *

That morning Sol’s pulse thrums in his ears. Sleep was difficult without his usual aid, but he could not bring himself to take that potion again. Not after what happened yesterday.

He must be losing his mind.

He dresses fast, then spends minutes staring at himself in the mirror—or rather, at the self he cannot see. *If Sol tries hard enough, he can almost see him. The self from the visions.* And not the vessel donning this ill-fitted haircut, this dress snipped and tailored for the woman he’s always tried yet failed to be.

Androcles was right: those dreams stopped the moment he cut back on that potion. Now, Sol almost misses it. The nightmares make it difficult to dream, let alone remain long asleep. It is so early in the morning that the sun has barely risen in the sky. But he figures he will get a head start on his day.

He pushes away the image of the man from yesterday.

And the way that man would treat him as a lover in his mind.

It is all so preposterous.

Sol—who has never once taken a lover—being bent over like one of the measuring tools he uses on the daily for his concoctions? “Ridiculous,” Sol echoes with a broken scoff. “As if that would happen to me.”

That’s right, Sol thinks to himself as he strides down wooden stairs into the middle of the shop. *There is purpose in my giving up on love.* Sol would much prefer not being loved at all, than to be loved as someone’s woman. And there is the reason why he is living here, too, but he would rather keep forgetting. Just like he is certain he will forget the visions in due time.

He must have been seeing things yesterday. He believes that, yes, until he reaches the shop’s transparent windowed-door. The man from his mind is standing right there, waving at him, dressed in a set of ridiculously expensive armor that was most certainly not purchased from Sol’s blithe, pitiful town. “Hello! Sorry to intrude. I’m Yohan!”

Sol remains frozen in place. It’s definitely *him*, no doubt about it.

But what does this mean for Sol? Sol’s thoughts race. *If those truly were visions, Sol cannot make sense of them.* He blinks as he stares at the man who holds a polite smile and patiently waits on Sol—but Sol is still replaying a story in his mind, one that raises questions, a fate that has yet to occur. *How does this man end up calling him Sol, exactly, when Sol has always kept this name to himself like an outlawed secret? Nobody knows. Nobody but him. Sol hasn’t told a person, not even the Gods.*

“Could you let me in?” Yohan’s voice is muffled behind the door. “Or, is it too early? I’m well able to come back, if that is best.”

Sol’s left brow twitches. He cannot comprehend why a soldier of Yohan’s stature is being so courteous. It’s a little suspicious, and Sol suddenly starts to wonder if those visions may have been ill omens and... not blessings.

He takes a deep breath. *Calm yourself, Sol.*

You will get that door. And you will not, for any good reason, end up in his Gods’ damned bed.

The walk towards the door is agony.

Try as Sol may to resist him, up close, Yohan is as handsome as the man from his dreams. As Sol nears, the intensity of Yohan’s gaze has his legs weak. Seeing

his dream lover in person is doing things to his loins that he'd rather not admit. *What a sad little existence he lives.* Sol has become a touch-starved fool whose heart would cling to anyone fitting his ideal; this is what he gets for abstaining, he supposes, the flashbacks from the visions certainly aren't helping either. But, there is fear in his heart, too. And it quickly quiets his yearning.

Sol reaches for the door.

On the other side of the entrance, the thin line by their feet that separates them both, Yohan places a hand over his heart then sighs in relief. "Thank you." He stares at Sol for a moment in his silence, his eyes widening—Sol assumes this is because the man expected to find Androcles, and not a young woman running his shop.

But it matters little to him. Sol motions for Yohan to enter. "Come in?"

"Ah," Yohan blinks. "Yes—of course."

The more Sol interacts with Yohan, the more he wonders if he is mistaken. The man from his dreams was gentle yet domineering. *Yohan is...* Sol squints as he observes the traveling soldier enter his mentor's shop with an awkward step. *A bit of a dork.*

Sol leans against the counter, wood creaks. "So, what brings someone like you here?" He doesn't mean to spit his words like venom, but he is wary. Yohan works for a nobleman no doubt, considering his attire—soldiers of his caliber rarely have use for magic. His mere presence here is an odd sight. A bad omen.

Yohan brings a fist to his lips, he clears his throat. "The King requests your aid." His eyes meet Sol's. "More specifically, my aid and yours—together."

"Me?" Sol points to himself in disbelief. "I... think there's been a mistake, I'm not Androcles."

"I'm searching for Solange."

Sol's lips tighten. *Ah, but of course, he would call me that.*

I don't know what I expected.

Sol ignores the sudden tightness in his chest, he takes a deep breath. "And what services can I offer His Majesty?" Sol figures he will get this over with quick.

Once Yohan leaves, Sol will reflect on his foolishness. *And on the fact that he actually believed in things shown to him by odd side-effects he incurred from that*

potion. For a few moments, he will perish from shame. And finally, then, will he be free to forget it all.

He will never see Yohan again.

* * *

“Yohan wants me to journey with him to craft a cure for his beloved King,” Sol tells his mentor, as he crushes his own set of herbs beneath his stone pestle, they break and crackle in the mortar.

“Why not go?”

Sol’s hands freeze at Androcles’s words. “I-I can’t do that!” Sol motions to the shop, the world around them. “The shop would fall into ruin!”

Androcles places a hand against Sol’s shoulder. “Solange, this shop has stood for many years, and will stand for many more centuries to come. Besides,” he barks out a laugh, “you’ve made so many potions since you first arrived, I would need at least a few months to burn through them all!” He walks away, toward the old staircase leading to their bedrooms. “Think about it, yes? Not every apothecary is met with the rare opportunity to travel the lands like this—let alone to service a King. You may not get another chance like this again, Solange.”

The sound of that woman’s name is like knives to Sol’s ears.

Sol merely nods and thanks his mentor. As he works through the night, Yohan’s face weighs on his mind, just like the weight of Yohan’s sweat clad body was pressed into Sol’s back when he dreamed. At the prospect of the journey, excitement courses through his veins. And dread. The visions were fun, but far from Sol’s reality, and now that they are aligning with the present Sol cannot help but be afraid. Yohan is here, in his village.

Yohan could touch him.

Yohan could harm him.

* * *

Sol doesn't think he'll ever get used to sleeping without the aid of that potion, it is proving quite difficult to last on four hours of slumber each day, but he refuses to succumb to his urge of taking it once more.

At least, not when Yohan is still around. He wouldn't be able to look the man in the eye, if he were to dream of fucking him every night. "Hello again," Sol only greets Yohan because it is the right thing to do, and definitely not because he wondered if he would see him today.

"Good morning!" Yohan's greeting is the liveliest Sol has ever heard from someone this early in the day. He mildly regrets speaking up, and prays Androcles will be here soon to take over when it comes to their conversation, until Sol remembers his mentor has gone to the markets for the morning.

Sol stares up at Yohan. At the way Yohan towers over him, his shadow darkening Sol's figure as it bleeds onto the counter. The two of them are alone. Sol doesn't think when he steps back once, on instinct, then brings his arms close to his chest. His lower lip quivers. "What brings you here?"

"Have I done something wrong?"

Sol's eye twitches. *Ah. Straight to the point, I see.* And here Sol hoped he'd been discreet enough for Yohan to disregard his discomfort. "I'm still considering the offer."

Yohan shifts on his feet, he squints when he stares at Sol. "That isn't what I'm referring to. Have I made you uncomfortable, Solange?"

This time, it is Sol's head that disappears into his shoulders, whilst he cringes at the name. "Not really." Sol tugs on one of his braids and looks away. "I merely get jittery in the mornings, it has nothing to do with you."

Yohan observes him in silence for a moment, he seems to be thinking about something; though what that thing is, Sol hasn't a clue. Eventually, Yohan clears his throat. "Well, as long as I didn't scare you..."

You didn't, Sol wants to say.

It was a man from the past who scared me—who still scares me today.

"Anyway." Sol's shoulders tense. He rests his hands flat against the counter then stares at them in a vacant, wide-eyed way. "What is your reason for taking me? Can't I simply make the antidote here?"

Yohan shakes his head. "I wish it were that simple, but I need someone like you to identify the ingredients properly. Certain roots growing in the area look

similar in size and shape, but are poisonous when picked.”

“And His Majesty trusts a *stranger* to do this over an apothecary from his own royal court?”

A long, exasperated sigh escapes Yohan’s lips. “If you must know...” He pinches at the bridge of his nose and hunches over slightly; it is the first time Sol has ever seen any form of slack in his body. “The royal apothecary was executed last month for cheating on His Majesty’s daughter, after being caught in a passionate affair.”

Unease grows inside Sol’s gut as he wonders what the King may do to him, should he be dissatisfied with his services.

It seems Yohan notices. “A moment.” Yohan raises his palm between them.

Sol holds himself back from flinching, though, his shoulders tense regardless.

Yohan raises a brow briefly, then backs away from Sol as his arm drops to his side again, he clears his throat. “I am aware His Majesty may reign with a cruel hand, but rested assured, I will not let any harm come to you, should you accept our offer.”

“...And what’s your relationship with the King?” Sol asks Yohan with a gulp. Because he would like to know, it still is not quite clear.

“That is—” Yohan scratches at his cheek, and Sol notices a shift in his posture. Something about his tone—*about him*—is off. “His Majesty begged me to marry into his family, you see! But I declined. Out of guilt, and in hopes of finding forgiveness, I aid His Majesty every now and then...”

Sol hums. “And he let you live?”

“Oh, yes, of course. You see...” As Yohan continues to provide him with an obviously fabricated explanation, Sol tunes out his words. He furrows his brows then squints to take in the sight of the darkness that follows in the man’s shadow, pulsing. It grows, a fog that threatens to engulf Yohan like a serpent coiled around his body. When Sol blinks, the strange vision has disappeared, but its presence remains, lingering. *He can feel it on the man. On Yohan.*

Yohan, the liar, Sol thinks, before parting his lips again. “And if you see them through the fog—*run,*” Sol repeats the legend like an old, soft-spoken song. “Handsome creatures hiding ancient secrets behind the faces of angels, Knights that bring only Death, Harbingers Of Malice: the old King’s Cursed Riders.”

Yohan's face pales, and that is when Sol realizes he was right. "You came here not because I was most convenient, but because you thought I wouldn't know, didn't you, *Harbinger Of Malice?*"

Sol's throat tightens into a nervous knot. *To think this was the creature he'd been seeing in his dreams...*

Yohan freezes. "Does your mentor also—"

"No, he does not know." Sol shakes his head then points to his ears, the way his elven heritage has shaped him. "It is my gift alone to be able to smell the reek of a curse on you."

At the words, the knight cringes. "*Reek?* Am I stinking up your store?" It is interesting, seeing his features scrunched up like this, Yohan had looked so seemingly perfect before: it was hard to believe he was real.

But he is.

"Your curse doesn't smell horrid." Sol waves Yohan's concerns away; it is true, those who have sought him out for help before may have smelled like rot or worse. *But Yohan...* "The scent is akin to freshly burnt wood. So, not bad. But noticeable."

A moth dives into the light, the lantern hung high about their heads. There is a sizzle, and then, a pop.

Yohan hooks an arm around the back of his neck. "I suppose it will be hard to convince you now." He lets out an awkward laugh. "Still, I didn't summon my steed on purpose and walked all the way here on foot. I must say, your talent surprised me." He sighs. "I regret losing you here."

Sol stares down to his fingernails, rested flat against the wood counter. "It wouldn't be hard..." he whispers.

And Yohan perks up. "Pardon?"

Sol brings his fists together in a silent prayer. "It wouldn't be hard to convince me." *You already have,* he leaves these words unsaid as another customer waltzes into the shop. An almost-too-perfect interruption.

Yohan appears to have questions, but he is out the door as fast as he'd come, once Sol begins to attend to the newcomer. That doesn't matter, however, for Sol knows the knight will return tomorrow. He can sense it in the air.

That night, Sol curls in on himself atop his old mattress and dreams of adventure, foreign lands. He does so the night after that, too, until another week

passes.

Sol rouses before the sun illuminates the sky in its usual golden glow. Something inside him tussles about. He grasps at the dark seaweed green fabric that hangs off the spine of his chair; he wraps his cape around his shoulders, slips into his boots. Sol's silhouette vaguely eclipses the flowerbeds nearby as he walks out, following fate to the outskirts of his village. Crows fly above-head, chasing invisible paths in the air. Sol thinks, that he wants to do it, too.

I want to leave.

He parts his lips. His eyes widen as peach light finally appears and breaks over his village, soft clouds reflect against his pupils. The call for adventure is tapping at his door. "I have to leave," he mumbles. He's never felt so sure of anything in his life.

I have to go.

* * *

Androcles released him from his duties as fast as a sneeze.

Sol feels as hollow, as he does ready to be filled with the world. Its new sights are slowly opening up to him already. Traveling by foot during such a journey is an interesting change of pace; the sunlight's warmth drapes over his back like a comforting cocoon, and Sol observes the Featherlaine from afar as he and Yohan retreat further away from civilization, they vanish deeper into the mountainside.

This past week bubbles in his mind, alongside the rising breeze that raises his heart in a soft, gentle sway. From telling Yohan he would think it through, having Androcles convince him to *go*, then seeing Yohan who would visit him every day in case Sol had any questions about their quest... *what a strange turn of events Sol's life has suddenly taken.*

"Something troubling you?" It is Yohan's voice.

"I'm not used to this." Sol falls silent whilst he crushes another pile of rocks, dirt beneath his boots as he strides forward. He yearns to be back home already, coddled up next to a warm fireplace creating trinkets, potions for the villagers. Though that life was suffocating, it suddenly feels as though he is breathing too

much, *feeling* too much; part of him wants to run back to the familiar. Yet here, where the mountainside air tastes good and the white bellflowers dance softly in the spring, Sol can only bring himself to stay.

“You don’t travel a lot?”

Sol’s eyebrow twitches. “I…” As much as he craved this adventure, he had *also* planned to stay away from Yohan. There was no need for them to become anything more than a mere business transaction—an *apothecary serving a knight*, yes, *that is what they should be*.

“Solange?”

Sol gulps. He steals a peek at Yohan. Yohan who is dangerous yet charming. *Yohan, whom he can’t seem to get out of his mind*. “No, not really.” Sol grabs at his elbow and squeezes. “At least, I travel less than you.”

He tries to will away the visions from his head, the sweet words Yohan would whisper to him in his wildest dreams, the way Yohan would run his hands down the curve of Sol’s spine.

If Sol were to lose his body to this man, it would only cause him heartache.

“Ah?” Yohan forces out a laugh. “Just how many legends of me have you heard, exactly? I’m a little embarrassed now.” He clearly isn’t.

Sol squints. “You’ve no need for modesty, here. No one is watching.” He pauses. “But…my parents used to tell me tales of the Harbingers in hopes of getting me inside by sundown.” Indeed, Sol loved to practice magic once darkness fell, he misses those fields from his childhood sometimes. But that life is one that is long lost now.

“You’re watching.” Yohan’s voice fills the air between them again. “Isn’t that enough?” He is looking at Sol now—into his eyes—and Sol’s chest tightens with the idea that Yohan is truly looking *at him*. *Not right through him*.

His mind briefly invokes the idea of *them* together, again, but that fire is smothered before it can even burn. Sol knows they would eventually part ways, and he would rather not test these reckless waters, where riptides are sure to swirl under their surface.

The numbness of his current life is more manageable, let alone predictable, in comparison to the cold whiplash of loneliness. The gaping hole that would come after experiencing great warmth.

After experiencing love.

Sol knows he would feel it.

Part of him already does, after having those dreams.

And he loathes it.

"I am surprised you aren't afraid of me."

"I was never afraid of you," Sol blurts in a moment of weakness, his pupils round and dilated as he fiddles with his backpack's arms. "I kept praying you would take me," he admits, in a nonchalant whisper, because it is true. Anything was better than growing up a woman in that town. "But you never came."

Yohan falls silent, then raises a brow at Sol for a moment. "That is..." He nods to himself, "certainly new." The knight clears his throat. "Most young women fear me—you are the first who hasn't run." As he stares up to the sky, he asks Sol, after a moment, "Whatever happened? For you to wish such things..."

And Sol clutches at fabric that covers his chest, as his heart tightens alongside his throat. He thinks of the past. *His parents. The people he no longer talks to.* "My mother thought it best if I were raised amongst human kin." He shrugs then averts his gaze to the scenery. "I can't say I blame her—the elvenfolk hate half-bloods like me. Oh." Sol pauses as he looks to Yohan, who seems dispirited by the story. "Don't worry." Sol tilts his head then shows him a practiced smile. "Even when my mother abandoned us, my father quickly found another woman to love."

It was never the same though, Sol cannot help but think, before he bites at his lower lip; there is an odd, trickle of pain somewhere deep inside him.

"I think," Sol sighs, "in a certain sense, I felt as though a Rider would understand me better than my own kin." He turns to Yohan then laughs. "Perhaps, you do! Who knows."

"Who knows, indeed..." the knight echoes as he takes a moment to collect himself. Yohan eventually shows Sol a polite smile, a curt nod. "I am grateful for your good graces, regardless. It remains rare to find anyone with faith in my kind."

Sol shrugs his backpack back onto his shoulder before it has a chance at slipping away. "I haven't been of much use to you, yet. Thank me once I have brewed that cure."

It is difficult to avoid falling into a comfortable banter with Yohan, he feels too familiar. *Perhaps,* Sol thinks as he laughs at one of Yohan's jokes, *I worry for*

nothing.

Perhaps, Sol thinks to himself, we will only be good comrades for the rest of the journey.

Perhaps, the more sensual parts of those visions are not accurate.

Still, there is no denying the two get along. And Sol pauses for a moment. *Young woman...* he thinks back to the part in his dreams where Yohan seemingly accepted him without much ado. *Would it be so wrong to tell him?*

After all, it is not like they would ever see each other again after this trip. As much as this may be a grand adventure to Sol, this is likely just another casual errand for Yohan to tick off his mundane list of things to do, to keep his beloved Kingdom safe. There will be no reason for him to stay in Sol's dull old town after having completed his quest.

Sol shuts his eyes, and blurts his thoughts before he can stop himself. "The life of Harbinger... must be stressful."

Yohan laughs, it is genuine this time. "Sometimes. But, it isn't all terrible." Sol hears the tension and sorrow riddled between the cusp of Yohan's words, the silent yet real meaning behind his statement, *but it is mostly terrible.*

He lingers on the thought, until he blinks and realizes what he has just done. *Did I just say that out loud—* "Oh, Gods... I'm so sorry." Sol holds his breath as he blushes, scorching red to his ears. "I didn't mean to say that out loud."

"It's quite all right." Yohan smiles at him. "We can talk. We've a long journey ahead, after all—might as well fill it with some interesting conversation," he says, and all the tension that had once sewn Sol's shoulders together unfurls.

He exhales again. And immediately understands what the Sol from his visions had seen in this man. There is something gentle, *protective*, about everything Yohan does. It makes Sol feel... *safe.*

But Sol shakes the thought away. *He must be losing his mind from all this walking.* He stares at the ground as Yohan tells him stories from being one of the Old King's Cursed Riders. It is odd to be hearing these accounts from a Rider's point of view, for once, and not the tales weaved together by bystanders who merely witnessed their passing in a town or a forest fight.

But after tales of his adventures, there comes a moment when the man grows silent. Yohan's lips thin into a bitter line. He tells Sol, that as the King's sword, he is always expected to be strong. "Whenever someone from the court speaks to

me, too, it is always in hopes of being in the King's good graces." He kicks at a rock on the dirt road. "As if they are talking to his pet," Yohan spits; and Sol wonders how many times he has told this story.

If today is the first, because of how the words come tumbling out of Yohan like an unrehearsed plea. It started with a short tale of how Yohan saved a village, and now they are here. "I cannot remember the last time I ever had someone I could call a proper friend. How dehumanizing it is, truly, they expect much of me. Too much. Yet time and again, I must live up to their expectations. And I do! Because failure would—" Yohan's lips remain parted as he pauses then looks around, wide-eyed and aghast, as if having woken from a long dream.

The knight clears his throat with a fist to his lips. "Failure would not be... desirable. Nobody wants to do a subpar job!" Sol has a feeling this is not what Yohan meant in the slightest, but he chooses to ignore the obvious lie; the knight seems to be reliving enough complicated memories as it is.

They walk in silence, side by side, for a moment. Until Sol tells him, "I'm sorry." Even though it would be temporary, he starts wishing he could be a friend to Yohan. "I wish there were some way to relieve you of those duties, if only by a little." But Sol reminds himself wishes do not matter in the face of fate. He and the knight are destined to be mere ripples in each other's lives, nothing more, nothing less.

"Indeed, I agree." Yohan raises a strong fist to the sky. "Which is precisely why I've planned to retire this year. Tell me, Solange," Yohan glimpses past his own pauldrons until their eyes meet again, his palm opens up to catch a morning cloud. "Do you feel as though your village would be an appropriate place to do so?"

In a nearby puddle, a dewdrop falls and creates a small ripple.

Sol blinks, slow, in disbelief. He can barely register the sting of being called Solange again as he stares, pale-faced at Yohan. *Yohan, the Old King's Cursed Rider. Yohan, the Harbinger of Malice who...* "What?" Sol scratches at the back of his head and forces a smile. "Ah, I think I'm growing weary! I'm hallucinating! Hearing strange, *strange* things!"

Yohan tilts his head in an oddly innocent manner. "Strange things?"

"Oh, yes." Sol flutters his eyelashes in a daze. "You won't believe what I misheard! For a second, I believed you wanted to retire in my village—"

“That’s correct, I do.”

The baffled yelp that escapes Sol echoes across the mountainside. “But *why!*” Sol grasps at the air around him. “It is so...” He sighs. “Ordinary?” Surely someone of Yohan’s status could afford... more.

Yohan shrugs. “I don’t know. It seems... nice. Quaint. There is everything you need to live peacefully: healers, mages, bakers—and nature!—are all just a walk away. Not to mention, there aren’t many townsfolk who know my face, since Featherlaine remains far enough from the King’s palace and the tales which surround it. And I’m already accustomed and familiar with it, now that I’ve stayed for a few days!” Though he was doubting the knight’s claims before, the fond smile that takes Yohan’s lips when he stares out into the distance—at the silhouette of Sol’s village, makes Sol think he is serious.

Around them, the wind rises. And Yohan asks him, “What’s not to like?”

Sol rearranges his leather backpack. “But wouldn’t it be boring?” They both set off again. “Do you not wish to think this through a tad more, instead of rushing to pick any old town?”

Their footsteps crunch across dirt paths. “Who says I am rushing?” Yohan walks ahead of him, until all Sol can see is the back of his head. “It may seem ordinary to you, but after traveling for so long... being still, in one place, would feel new to me.”

Sol hums. “Suppose I can’t argue with that.”

Behind them, the village disappears farther and farther away. The idea of being so distant from home is oddly exhilarating to Sol, yet frightening all the same. Sol fears the lack of routine, born from this teeming illusion of freedom, may introduce leniency in his life—the type that causes men to take reckless decisions. Find regret. And make too many a mistake.

“And you?”

Sol frowns at Yohan’s question. “Me?”

The knight nods. “What will you do after this?”

“What I always have.” Sol strides past Yohan in turn, he dares not face him as he stares down to his boots, squashing bronze dirt in a hurry.

He doesn’t want to think. Not about this freedom, nor his deepest desires.

Sol isn’t like Yohan. He can’t just walk away tomorrow—if he were known to a single person in his village as Sol and not Solange, it would take a mere one

man overhearing, until everyone in Featherlaine would know. And if most of the villagers disapproved, then Sol is certain all the townsfolk would side with them, from fear of being ostracized. That's how it works, in little places like these.

Yes, having time to think—to puncture and peek into one's own heart—is a dangerous thing, Sol thinks.

Because he finds himself wanting.

Wanting more.

"I'll return to the shop," Sol huffs. "I'll help my mentor. And I'll sell some Gods damned potions."

* * *

Sol reaches for the crescent moon with an upturned palm. The clouds swirl around cream light, melting into strange intricate shapes, each all the more unnatural than the next. He and Yohan are in the land of spirits now, that much is clear.

The fire crackles with dimming light between the two men. Sol is a tad chilled inside his sleeping bag without a tent for shelter; but Yohan insisted that camping out, under the stars for the night, would be safest. *Bandits like to roam these parts for treasure,* he had said, *the tent's shape would alert them of our location.*

"Solange?"

Sol's gut drops at the name. His chest fills with a cold, brittle feeling, yet, it is not from the wind.

For a moment, he had gotten too comfortable, he had almost forgotten Yohan doesn't know. *It has been a while since the man called him that.*

As much as Sol would rather pretend he is sleeping, instead of answering to the name, he is all too aware this could regard something important. So, he parts his lips then says, "Yes, Yohan? What is it?"

"I wanted to make sure you were comfortable."

Sol scoffs. "And here I thought you were going to tell me bandits were on the way..."

"Apologies if I gave you worry. It is merely that—" Yohan pauses, he presses his lips together. "The last woman I escorted didn't seem too keen on foregoing

her tent, and sleeping next to me, you see. And I worried that..."

"That I might feel the same?"

Yohan nods.

Perhaps, it is silly, yet Sol pauses nonetheless to ponder on the idea of Yohan alone with another. "Do you, um—" Sol finds his mouth moving before he can stop himself; his lower lip trembles, he laughs, awkwardly. "Often spend a lot of time with women in the woods?" His face warms, the fatigue from the journey must have gotten to him, if he is already spouting such unbecoming nonsense. *What in the gods is he saying?*

"Apologies, that is not what I meant to imply..." Yohan falls silent for a moment then flutters his eyelashes, before he looks away then hooks an arm around the back of his own neck. "I do not." He shakes his head. "I actually... prefer company of a more *virile* kind," the knight clears his throat, "if you must know." The silence that follows is agonizing as both men stare at each other without another word.

Sol suddenly becomes very aware of the now deafeningly loud mating calls of a toad some lengths away. "Oh." He blinks. "I see." He isn't quite sure what to say now. "Thank you for... sharing."

"Yes, well!" Yohan clears his throat, there is a light dusting of pink spread across his cheeks now. "*Moving on!*" he declares, before he meets Sol's gaze again; and for the first time, Sol notices the lines under his eyes, accentuated by the firelight. "Perchance, is there *anything* I can do to make you more comfortable? I know not everyone is used to traveling...under such conditions."

Another ridiculous thought consumes Sol in this instance, but, his sleep-addled mind figures it is harmless. "Could you call me Sol instead?"

"Sol?"

Sol's chest flutters with the warmth of being called for the first time. He blinks, twice, then averts his gaze. He hopes Yohan doesn't take notice of the hot flush that rises to his face. "Y-Yes, I... like it better than Solange."

Is this truly okay? Sol wonders in silence. *What if it's an odd request?*

Before Sol's ruminations have a chance at growing too loud in his mind, Yohan clears his throat again. "That shouldn't be a problem!" The knight exclaims, "I've had to surrender my own sleeping bag to traveling nobles, who found it difficult to sleep in the cold nights of winter, more times than I can

count!” He laughs—though, Sol does not know why the knight is casually brushing this off as an everyday occurrence, surviving the biting winds of winter without a sleeping bag sounds quite frankly horrifying.

Yohan’s palm finds Sol’s knuckles, he rests it there for a moment and smiles at Sol. “One simple difference in your name is not a burden at all, Sol.” And Sol’s heart goes still. Although he knows it is wrong, Yohan is eight years his senior—and a cursed man at that, too—Sol cannot help how his eyes linger across the sharp angles that build Yohan’s face, the way the knight keeps his greying hair pulled back to reveal his intense, azure gaze.

He is handsome, undeniably so.

Being half-asleep in bed, next to a man Sol could only dream of having, finds him pining for the knight... “Your lover must miss you.” Sol doesn’t know what possesses him to blurt such a thing, but he soon finds his bearings again, when the words he’s just spoken aloud settle between them. “W-Wait! Actually... nevermind, you don’t need to answer that. I apologize, I didn’t mean to pry—”

“There is no lover.” Yohan rests his chin atop his own hand. He meets Sol with a soft, reassuring gaze, and Sol has never felt so naked before a man despite still wearing his day robe. “Though, I would *certainly* not be opposed to taking one.”

“O-Oh!” Sol gulps. “Is that so...” He is delirious if he thinks that means he may have a chance—a *chance at what, exactly?* Sol wonders—yet, after they retire that night, he is wide awake.

Sol stares at the moon for what feels like hours, his heart pulsing in his ears.

There is no lover.

I would certainly not be opposed to taking one.

Yohan’s words ring through the air like a haunting—until morning greets him earlier than he’d like, when the roaring shouts of men pierce the silence and the birds run from the trees.

Sol quickly scrambles to his feet. It seems Yohan has the same idea, for soon the two of them are standing, looking at each other with tense apprehension as Yohan brings a hand to the hilt of his sword. In the distance, the silhouettes of five men running toward them, near. Sol is no expert, but it is clear as the rising dawn that they are either amateurs who seek to intimidate, or quite confident they’ll get away with whatever it is they plan to do once here.

“Yohan...” Sol speaks the knight’s name under his breath; he does his best to keep his hands from trembling, but the sheer number of bandits has his mind buzzing with the fear that this will not end well. “What should we—”

“We aren’t in any danger,” Yohan speaks the words plainly. Still, he keeps his voice down all the same. His jaw tenses. “Trust me.”

Sol briefly wonders if the knight is simply being brave, but he hasn’t time to question the matter for long, as the weight of heavy footsteps stomping circle in on their location.

The bandits—all men of various statures and ages—surround them with their weapons drawn, bows and blades, each one sharper than the last. Silver reflects, shimmering beneath the rising sun, that blesses the horizon like ichor in deep orange streaks. Sol wonders if this is the last light he will ever see. “Well, well, travelers! Seems luck wasn’t on your side today,” their leader cackles then brings his hands to his hips.

Sol does not like how the man is looking his way with great interest, his eyes wide and mad. “But luck has definitely blessed us, on the other hand: A mage! A *gods damned mage!* To think we’d come across something as valuable as you so early in the morning.” The man licks his lips with a crass snicker.

Sol’s blood goes cold as the bandits’ leader motions for his group to surround him, and Yohan. “I’m sure you’ll be able to do many things for us,” the man says as he continues to stare right at Sol. “we’ll treat you right, ‘long as you behave.”

Sol retreats back into himself. *Please... not this.* Sol has not used his Gift properly in years, he wonders, if he could even take them in a fight. *Or, if it would be best to let these bandits seize him, then strike when they least expect it.* But everything in his mind is jumbled, he cannot think straight nor form a proper plan, *he’s never been in a fight like this before.*

Sol doesn’t understand how Yohan can remain so unperturbed, as if these men are barely a threat at all.

The bandits’ leader faces Yohan. “You seem like a smart man.” He snorts. “You know what to do.”

Yohan smirks in turn, the only sign of emotion he’s shown since the bandits first arrived. “That, I do.”

Before Sol can blink, Yohan has slit the man's throat with his sword. The bandits' leader falls—limp—to the floor.

The archers in their group raise their weapons and aim for Yohan, but the men surrounding them barely have time to draw their arrows. Yohan takes them down in one fell swoop. "I have slain dragons and beasts of the foulest kind!" Yohan growls as he twists steel into a man's chest who writhes amid the pain. "Why do you think you could scare me?"

Four of the men fall to Yohan's sword within moments. Sol is frozen in place, he can only watch as he crosses his arms over his chest to shield himself away from the fray. Another man screams, then topples over into the mud. Sol knew life was a brittle thing, yet seeing men die in battle within the span of mere seconds... Gazing into the well of mortality *like this* makes him feel so terrifyingly small, *insignificant*.

Yohan turns towards the last bandit, who trips then falls onto his hind. It is clear this one is younger than the rest; he can barely be called a man. As Yohan strides up to him, the knight looks down to his existence, pity in his gaze. "Whatever glory they promised you, you shall not find it here." He points his sword's blade to the young boy's neck. "Is this truly how you want to die?"

The boy's lip shakes. "N-No, I'm-merely—"

"Run, then." Yohan briefly draws his weapon back. He stares the boy in the eye, cold murder in his gaze. "Before I change my mind." The boy takes the opportunity to rise to his feet, his hands are covered in muck and mud as he stumbles away with a mix of blood, tears sticking to his face.

Yohan's back is turned to Sol as he sheathes his sword; he kneels around the corpses and presses his hands together in a silent prayer, mumbling words from an ancient language Sol does not understand. The air carries the strong reek of iron when the knight finally stands.

Sol asks him, "You pray?"

Yet Yohan only shakes his head. "It was a spell from the Old King, so that their souls would not find me again."

Sol pauses. "A common occurrence?"

"Unlikely, but not unheard of," Yohans tells him. "I do not take chances." The knight turns towards their belongings. He bends his knees, he begins to reach for his own backpack, when he finally catches a glimpse of himself. *His hands*.

Yohan's eyes widen in slight, Sol assumes, once the knight realizes he is covered in blood. "There..." Yohan stares up at Sol, in an oddly apologetic manner. "There should be a well on the outskirts of a nearby village. Do you mind if we wash up there quickly?"

"Yohan, I don't mean to be a pessimist..." Sol mutters as he, too, makes quick work of grabbing his belongings for the journey to come; his fingers are still shaking. "But all that blood on your armor might not work in your favor, if someone were to accidentally see you."

The knight does not respond, he seems lost in thought; his eyes are fixated on the ground, where a patch of daisies were squashed during the fray, all the life bent out of them in the shape of sollerets—only one remains untouched.

"Yohan?" Sol calls out to him again. "Are you all right?"

Yohan snaps out of his daze, his lower lips jerk downward briefly, before he looks away from the flowers, back to Sol. "I will be fine, but..." Yohan's attention lingers on Sol's sleeve, where blood was splattered across its bright fabric, during one of his kills; he shuts his eyes for a moment. "I am sorry you had to witness such an unsightly spectacle."

Even though he is still a tad antsy, Sol takes a step forward. He tells the knight, "Don't be sorry for saving me."

"I always strive to avoid a fight whenever possible, if I am not traveling with the Old King's Riders." Yohan shakes his head as he rises to his feet. "But... regarding your question, I hoped it may be early enough in the morning to avoid any villagers..." Yohan presses his lips together. "Though, I suppose, you aren't wrong. That remains a possibility," he says, before falling silent again for a short while. Yohan straightens up, then stares at Sol. "Right. I apologize, Sol, but could I ask you for a favor?"

Of course, Sol is not one to refuse when Yohan suggests he be the one to scout the area. "A wise suggestion," Sol tells the knight—and although the two doubt running into more bandits will be an issue after Yohan's... rather *sanguine demonstration*, Yohan trails behind Sol. Just in case.

Heathlocke, Sol had heard of this mellow little village from his mentor. Androcles had mentioned buying a good few ingredients from their herbalist in the past, when he'd briefly taken up the task of selling batches of enchanted

herbal tea ingredients to local tearooms for their brews: an endeavor that, as fun as it was, ended up being too much for the two of them alone.

Sol can still remember the late nights he'd spend choosing what herbs to order, and which ones he'd have to go out and gather himself.

The village is close to desolate. Sol had heard most of the mages and apothecaries took their business elsewhere, once the roads became all the more difficult to cross, after the bandits and their maleficence started taking root in Heathlocke's environs.

Sol reaches the village entrance. Aside from the odd cat prowling gravel streets, the village is quiet, and the houses that line its outskirts still very much asleep. A relieved huff leaves Sol's lips as he signals for Yohan to come forth, out from where he'd been hiding in the bushes of a vegetable garden nearby.

The two make quick work of rinsing the blood out of their clothes; Sol had cursed himself for accidentally packing too many towels for the journey, yet, they are coming in quite handy now. Though his nose wrinkles throughout the whole ordeal, this is far from a pleasant experience, and Sol could do without the strong iron stench that imbues itself in the fabric.

"We should leave them behind," Yohan tells him as he twists then squeezes scarlet soaked cotton between his fists. "I'll buy you new towels."

"What? Why?"

The knight presses his lips together. "It'll be hard to get that scent out while we're on the road. We don't want to attract wolves." Yohan stares down at the towels, his eyebrows raised in a regretful arch. "Sorry, I hope you weren't too attached to them."

"No." Sol shakes his head. "No, it's fine..." He sighs as his mind wanders back to their encounter with the bandits. "That was barely a fight at all..." Sol isn't quite certain why he spouts this, but it's been on his mind. *The way in which Yohan ruthlessly took them out.*

"In these parts, they are infamous for the brutal murders of many a traveler," Yohan tells him. "I did what I needed to, for they would not have left the next unsuspecting soul unscathed." Yohan rubs the wet cloth across the grime that clings to his face, down the reds that drip across his arm; there is no hesitation in his movements, Sol cannot help but wonder how many times he's done this

before. What sort of life he's been living up until now. "If their surrender had been an option, I would have considered it."

When Sol lifts his arm to clean himself off in turn, Yohan pauses.

"Sol." The knight reaches for Sol's hand, where he inspects the blood that has dried over Sol's knuckles. "Are you hurt?"

The genuine worry in Yohan's voice catches Sol by surprise; he did not expect it, after the man was able to kill like that. "No, it's—" Sol glances away from him and tugs his arm back towards his own chest. "Not mine."

"Apologies." Yohan immediately releases him, he glances down to Sol's arm. "I didn't mean to startle you." He sighs in relief. "I— Thank the gods, I'm glad you are unharmed."

Sol stares down to his fingers in silence. "It is thanks to you that I am unharmed. Not the Gods," he mutters under his breaths.

He does not think Yohan hears him, for the knight continues to wash himself clean of the blood and the gore and of today's morning.

* * *

They've been traveling for three whole days now, across vast plains each all the more endless than the last, until they finally reach the woodlands. "I can't tell if this is better or worse," Sol mutters, as he and Yohan step through a rather imposing crowd of pine trees, pushing past branches with a scent so strong they curse Sol with a scrunched nose.

"Quiet," Yohan presses a hand to Sol's mouth. "I hear something in the distance."

The heat of Yohan's skin against his—the sheer size of Yohan's palm covering half his face—does things to Sol he would rather not admit.

But Yohan soon pulls away. "Come," he tells Sol. "I believe this might be good news, actually."

Yohan leads him toward the sound of running water, until they reach another clearing, a stream. And Sol's eyes widen with excitement, as he whistles, "Good find."

Yohan dashes towards the water. “And just when we’d been running low!” Yohan is on the verge of dipping his hands into clear blue, when Sol stops him.

“Let me, first.” From his satchel, Sol fetches a small triangular vial filled with sheer violet liquid. He then reaches around for his backpack, from which he grasps a large round bottle that has been emptied of its contents.

Sol dips the round bottle into the stream, until it has gathered enough water inside its now filled body. Then, he adds a single drop of the purple solution to the water—Sol swirls both inside the glass with a flick of his wrist.

He gives the bottle’s new contents a subtle whiff, nodding in approval at the water. “We should be good now. I’ve cleansed it.”

Yohan stares at him and, at the sight of the bottle, tilts his head with intrigue. “I’ve rarely seen that type of potion around.”

“For good reason,” Sol says, whilst he absent-mindedly repeats the process again with a second, new vial. “They’re incredibly expensive to make. As a result, nobody ever buys them, so they’re rarely produced.”

Once he is finished, Sol packs the water away with another sigh. “Travelers seem more fond of unfortunate bathroom trips from impure water, rather than parting ways with their coin.” Sol furrows his brows. “But! Not me.” He faces Yohan as he rises to his feet again. “I’d rather my ass intact for the journey, thank you very much.”

He doesn’t expect Yohan to laugh as much as he does.

Sol’s eyebrow twitches. “W-What?”

“Nothing of importance, this merely...” Yohan shuts his eyes, though his expression remains fond. “It reminds me of when I used to travel with my comrades, years ago.”

Sol nods, in a slow, deliberate manner. “Did they...”

“There are loads of reasons why people disappear.” Yohan steps away from the stream.

“But, you haven’t disappeared.”

“Not yet.” Yohan looks to the ground in mute contemplation, a frown etches itself into his features. It is as if he is remembering something. *Something painful.* “But, who knows what the future holds...” The knight forces a smile as he raises his head, and meets Sol’s eyes again, he motions for Sol to follow him into the woods.

The way Yohan talks about himself—like some disposable tool—makes Sol’s heart ache.

Above, pine warblers sing songs of love in the springtime; Sol takes unadulterated delight in watching their fuzzy round coats vibrate when they land, flying from branch to branch, free as birds are. Amid their featherlight chirps, crowds of trees sway under the burning sun, goldlight spills at Sol’s and Yohan’s feet then warms the forest bed.

When they reach more complicated terrain, Yohan offers his hand to Sol.

And at the palm outreached before him, Sol hesitates for a moment, before he touches Yohan skin with reluctance. There is a spark, electric fire in his veins, yet Sol walks in silence and dares not speak up, for he feels as though he would blurt something foolish if he were to. Because the warmth of the knight’s body heat is more reassuring than he likes to admit, and Sol has not felt so protected in years.

“Let’s find a safe place to set up camp,” Yohan tells him. And Sol can only agree as he nods.

The two journey deeper, sinking into the greenery and its foliage, Sol thinks of tales from his childhood. Of fallen heroes, legends who were there until they were not. Kings who were important, until they were gone. What it is like to exist in this world, and to disappear.

Yohan seems comforted by the idea of falling into his own shadow, even when he is on the verge of leaving behind his legends to become an ordinary man. There is solace on the knight’s features whenever he talks of fading away from tales told amid inns at midnight. *Sol only wishes he could find such peace.*

The thought of departing without leaving behind a mark, a trace of himself across these lands, has him terrified. Sol wonders if there is a future in which he, too, could be content with his own existence—able to let go.

When was the last time life was a journey to be explored, and not some hollowed out, threadbare sad body to be filled with distractions? Sol asks himself. *When was the last time he did something he truly wanted to?* Because he can’t remember. *He only wishes he could have Yohan’s courage to leave it all behind.*

To become the man he wants to be.

When it is night, they set up their tents for the first time.

Sol is left sleepless. As he stares at the dark green tarp above, he thinks of the knight's smile, *the way his lips curve into that perfect, inviting grin.*

Throughout the day, there were moments in which he caught Yohan *looking* for a tad longer than usual; the knight's gaze lingered on Sol's shoulders during dinner, and when they were washing up by the riverside, too. Though Sol does not quite understand why, since the knight supposedly does not see him in that light, the visions linger in his mind like herbs left out to dry. He wonders, if Yohan would want this just as much as Sol wants this.

To be touched.

To forget.

To do the unimaginable, after having played a role to perfection for so long. *A knight should not bed his King's hire. They say a woman should not open her legs for a man she barely knows.* But Sol is tired of being a woman, just as Yohan tires of being a Rider. He craves to slip into Yohan's tent and share his first kiss with the knight. *To shed his past beneath Yohan. Have Yohan take him as a silent act of rebellion.*

He wants to have him and to be had.

Clearly, he is losing his mind.

Sol takes a deep breath. He gets up.

He does not walk toward Yohan's tent. Instead, he sighs, as he wraps his arms around his own shoulders then looks to the ground. "As if I could even convince him that I am a man..." Sol mutters under his breath. "He was probably staring because I had something on my face..."

In a nearby puddle, Sol catches a glimpse of himself. His chest tightens.

Soon, it is not arousal that swims in his belly, but ragefire from wearing the skin of a stranger for so long: everywhere Sol looks, Solange is present. In people's hearts. In their memories. In the documents he signs. In the dresses he wears for the odd occasion.

Throughout each corner of his life, she haunts him like a ghost.

Sol takes another step forward, his breaths are heavy, as he strides towards the woods. He feels ill. The idea of escaping Solange sounds like the purest bliss, but the reality of leaving her behind is not that simple. If only—if *only* he could make it all disappear with a snap of his fingers, *if only, he could be himself.* But vulnerability is a scary thing. He does not want to feel that way again.

Sol submerges himself deeper into the woods, away from the camp and Yohan, in hopes of calming his mind. His heart races. He cannot believe that—for a second—he actually considered *telling* Yohan.

Perhaps, it is the fresh mountain air that makes Sol feel as though he could have the world in his palm, *if he simply gave himself to it*. And yet, the possibility of such a life existing, is... somehow, more daunting, than having once passively accepted the fate of never knowing the warmth of one's existence.

For Sol finds himself yearning to take action. To do *anything* and *everything* and become all that he has dreamed of. *But... he does not know how, nor if it is maybe, too late for that.*

And it is suffocating.

Sol comes to a halt once he arrives amid an alcove within the forest trees. This place does not feel like the rest of the woods; whispers linger in the air, the winds are gentler here, embracing Sol like a friend. "Come out," Sol mutters under his breath, because he knows magic when he sees it. *Someone's here.*

"Found already, I see." A woman's playful voice echoes through the forest and bounces off the trees. She materializes before Sol, and he freezes at the sight of her.

The woman's hair is pulled back, a braid of roots from which leaves sprout. Her opal eyes gleam iridescent under the moonlit lands. Despite her naked body clearly belonging to the woodlands, her face looks closer to Sol's elven side than he would have expected. *A forest nymph*, Sol realizes.

The forest nymph giggles. "You're talented. Most take a few days to notice." She sways her hips then clasps her palms together behind her back. Sol does his best not to look.

He has heard tales of these creatures abducting mortals. It would be best to walk away.

"Shy, are we?" Her tone is like poisoned honey—seductive yet lethal. As she tiptoes around Sol, she breathes him in. "Ah." The forest nymph pauses. "Not exactly, I see." Sol can feel her digging through his mind. "Worry. Fear. *Excitement.*"

He knows it would take one single push to stop her. But she is right. His heart cannot stop pounding at the idea of this encounter: forest nymphs do not

seek what humans yearn for, and she would not prey on Sol like that horrid man did.

The idea of being bare before a spirit who has likely seen worse than Sol in her lifetime is, in some ways, exactly what he needs.

“Oh?” the forest nymph hums. She runs a hand down Sol’s shoulder, and Sol leans into it, into her. “*Interesting*. I was planning on simply devouring you, you see. But...” Her cool breaths fall against Sol’s neck. “Sol,” she whispers, chilled words into Sol’s skin. “I want to experience you.”

Sol stares at the ground, never at her. His face warms. “And what would that entail?”

She runs her lips across his ear. “I have seen your desires—I can make you feel like the man you’ve always been.”

“How...” Sol’s arms tense by his sides as his knees tremble with want. Perhaps, he is mad for even considering the offer. “How do I know you will not eat me?”

She scoffs again. “If I wanted to, I would have already.”

However dreadful that thought may be, it reassures Sol all the same. He does not feel as though she is lying. Nymphs are known for taking as they please—and yet, here she is. Asking. Not taking.

“Say I agree...” Sol’s jaw tightens. His pulse rises up his throat. “Would I be allowed to walk away?”

She laughs, her voice pretty yet sharp as thorns. “Yes, but you will not want to.” The forest nymph runs her fingers beneath Sol’s chin, she rubs her thumb against his lip, and smiles. And Sol cannot help but think that she is beautiful. “You will return, if we do this once.”

Sol’s lower lip quivers. He presses his legs together as warmth spreads through him—he is sure she can feel this, too, for her grin grows wider. He lets her in. She wraps her arms around his neck. Her hardened nipples press into his chest. The forest nymph is sorting through his memories now, holding his life in the palm of her nimble hands—there is something exhilarating about having her infiltrate his essence, it is like being connected to magic, to the ancient world itself.

“Yes—” Sol breathes the word into her mouth as she runs her tongue close to his lips. But they do not kiss. She undresses him. And Sol tilts his head back, he

loses himself to the feel of the forest nymph's hands exploring his body that stirs with elation. *So, this is what it's like to be touched...* the thought buzzes through his mind that she continues to pick apart. He wonders if she can feel herself through him, the delight and ecstasy running hot in his veins. *If this is why she had wanted to share a moment with him.*

The roots that shackle the forest nymph's ankles move like waves, contracting in strange, intricate motions until the flora—*wildflowers, tree-bark, pine needles*—quiver then spew three more of her into the alcove with the next gust of wind that follows. One of her copies embraces Sol from behind, her naked chest pressed to his back as she thrusts her fingers into his mouth, he suckles on the taste of sweet leaf.

The second, plays with Sol's nipples, leaving kisses all the more tender against Sol's jaw. And the third touches herself to the sight of them. She is the one who talks to Sol. Who whispers, "Come play with us tomorrow, Sol." As she moans then tenses, the small buds around her roots blossom into multitudes of flowers from all across the lands. "Meet us by the stream, Sol."

And Sol thinks that even if he never meets the world as himself, even if love never finds him, at least he was given a tender gesture tonight. Something to cling to when he will be old and deprived of an existence that could have been.

The forest nymph embraces him again, ancient timeless creature that she is, reaching for his heart; if he is destined to leave this world as Solange, then at least, he hopes the existence of Sol will live on inside her for the eons to come.

* * *

When Sol returns to the campsite, the fire is long extinguished and Yohan still fast asleep.

Sol slips into his tent.

Inside his bedroll, he brings his own fingers to his lips and pushes them to his tongue. He sucks on his bone knuckles as he revels in the memory of the forest nymph's touch. *Gods, what has he done?*

To be willingly fucked by a nymph is folly. He knows that he is toying with death. If she suddenly decided to snap his neck in two, there would be nothing Sol could do.

But there is a hunger inside him. He *wants* her to make him feel like a man again. He wants her to touch him, as he is—*as Sol*. And when the day that follows is slow, full of rain turning the terrain into a dangerous slope, Yohan and Sol haven't a choice but to spend it inside their tents as they fare the storm. Sol has time—*too much time*—to think as he burns through three thick tomes like an obsessed reader, a troubled mind. He wishes he could forget her. He wishes he could forget what she made him feel.

He wishes he could turn his eyes away from the appetite of wanting to be loved. *Of wanting to be Sol. Even if just this once.*

He spends the day wishing. The weather eases out of capricious thunder only once dusk breaks.

When Yohan and Sol eat together that night, across from each other around the vampire, Yohan seems to notice something is amiss “Are you all right?” he asks Sol. “You look worried about something.” The knight shows him a kind smile. “I know we’ve only just met, but if you need an ear, I’m happy to lend one.”

Sol tenses. He grasps at his elbow, then squeezes. As his lips thin into a line, he considers telling the knight everything. It would be so easy to talk. So easy for Yohan to dissuade him. Of course, it is madness to bed a nymph—*not once, but twice, too*. Of course, he should promise to leave this be and count himself lucky to have survived the encounter just this once.

Of course, Sol merely tells him, “No, I’m fine,” and his nails dig a little deeper into the thick sleeve that covers his arm. He is on edge that night when they finally turn in. For he knows tomorrow will rob him of the chance of being Sol again, and his mind races with the very notion of that life which he hates to a bitter end.

For a moment Sol eases into slumber, thinking himself *a fool, a fool, a fool* who, upon waking again—sleepless and terribly bothered by the ache in his heart, his cunt—slips out of his tent in dead silence.

He couldn't help himself.

Sol's eyes are wild, searching the environs for the forest again, *the stream*.

He couldn't help himself—he didn't want to give this up, not just yet.

Soon, Sol is treading past their campsite and into the woods, leaving nervous footsteps down the trail leading to the stream, as if lured towards madness again.

Gods, he is a fool. But she has what he wants—and isn't that how all foolishness begins? The granting of wishes that cannot be granted?

At first he does not see her. Though, he hears her calling out, "My lovely, you are here."

Sol stares at the stream, how the rocks wedged inside its bed split the running waters in two. "I'm lovely?"

"Your mind is."

Sol reaches downward, into the sky's reflection. "Surely, you have seen more interesting." His heart is beating fast in his chest with anticipation; he does his best to appear calm. Collected.

He is losing his mind.

"I have." The forest nymph lets out a cheeky hum. "But, your struggle is unique." She smiles. "What will you do with it, I wonder?" The forest nymph licks her lips. "And how can I undo you? Men are rarely as lonely nor abstinent."

Ah, Sol's shoulders drop upon hearing the words, his heart runs a little colder now, so she pitied me.

"Not pitied." The nymph's form rises from the water, Sol watches the sharp edges in her graceful smirk as she reaches for his chin again. "Intrigued."

Perhaps, he should take offense, but Sol was well-read on nymphs during his studies—having learned their lives, which span eons, shape their minds in peculiar ways mortal kin could never begin to understand. *If her interest in him has kept him alive until now, that is a good sign, a great chance.* And he is quite curious, too. The more time he spends around her, the more her magic speaks to him. She feels more powerful, more ancient than anything Sol has ever encountered before. It is possible she protects not a single tree, but the entirety of these lands themselves. *And what a beautiful, captivating thing that is.*

He sees it now... how could he simply leave without saying goodbye?

"Come in," the nymph whispers, as the water around her takes the form of branches that hook around his clothes then strip him bare. "Come here, to me."

Sol's breaths grow heavy. *She is the very embodiment of Power all mages crave. He cannot bring himself to look away.* He kneels inside the stream. The water is cold, yet his skin is scorched with desire. *Hunger.* The worst of endings could

happen here—still, his heart beats with flurried arousal at the thought of experiencing her anew.

The nymph towers over him. She runs a chilled finger down Sol's spine, and grips a hand into his hair, tugging ever so slightly. Sol feels a wetness build between his thighs as the water-sculpted branches bend then soften and slide across his skin. The water glows, taking on an incandescent sheen, pale crystalline cyan fondles his body in ways Sol never thought possible. One of the branches thins then wraps itself around Sol's cock, pumping Sol in ways he could only dream of being touched. *But here, beneath her, the impossible exists no longer.* "Oh—" Sol's eyes widen. He chokes around a moan. "Gods, please—"

The nymph chuckles behind him. She lifts his chin and runs her teeth across his ear. "I am no God, my lovely. They have long since abandoned my kind." She slips her cool, wet fingers down the curve of his ass; the nymph massages his entrance open in circles. Sol likes that she does not enter him. Her touch is *just enough* for a pleasant warmth to cloud his mind.

Ripples form in the water below. Sol leans into the forest nymph's touch, he thrusts his hips forward on instinct, as she continues to stroke the bud of his cock. Until Sol moans, then comes around the stiffening, cool of the water.

The nymph runs her hands down his chest, leaving Sol a whimpering mess. "Leave tonight," she whispers beside his ear. "My sisters will be here soon—they are not as lenient. They will eat you and your friend."

Sol's eyes shoot open as if waking from a dream—it could have very well been, for the water soon falls and splashes around him, leaving no other sight to Sol than the one of his red-faced reflection in the stream. The moon and clouds tower over him like strange deities, watching his every move. He has never seen himself like this. His shoulders are flushed. It hurts to look at his body, and yet, he was in so much pleasure mere minutes ago despite himself... Sol runs a soft hand down his chest. For the first time, he wonders if he could embrace this odd husk. It still does not feel right—he doubts it ever will—but it brought him a moment of reprieve and bliss despite it all. *It made him feel good, as Sol and not Solange.*

Sol takes a minute to catch his breath. In a brief, moment of absence he reaches for the water and drinks from the stream. Though, he spits it out shortly after. "Urgh. What was I thinking?" As he spits more of the water, tears line his

eyes, and Sol pauses with his head hung low. “I don’t want to go back...” he whimpers.

Sol snuffles. *Once I go back, I’ll return to playing the role of Solange again.* “Please,” he begs the nymph, “don’t make me leave.” He cannot move, *he cannot leave*, he does not want this to be the end of him. “Let me stay with you...” Sol begs, even when the nymphs’ gift of freedom has already been ripped from his grasp. “I’ll do anything! I-I’ll even—”

Sol blinks and—somehow, he is back in the tent again, laying in his bedroll.

Outside, an empty howling prowls across the lands, Sol swears he hears the wind whisper to him.

I already told you—you cannot stay.

But, you should tell him. You should tell Yohan.

It is okay, Sol. You were born to be yourself, after all.

Sol’s eyes widen as he gasps, he stares at the wind ripples that crease the tent above head. He doesn’t understand anymore, how he got here, whether it was all a dream or reality; it is all so strange yet fitting of the legends, the warnings of tampering with ancient magics.

Tell him, the voice whispers again.

Leave.

Leave tonight.

This time, Sol rises to his feet then heeds her warnings. He does not want to take chances, even when his heart aches with loss. His sweat-soaked shirt clings to his back as he pushes past the haunting voice, then bursts into Yohan’s tent, Sol shakes the older man awake.

Sol cannot help but take notice of Yohan’s bare chest, how well sculpted the muscles that sit across his broad shoulders are. *But that isn’t what he came here for, so, he looks away.*

Yohan blinks. The knight seems groggy, yet still, he wakes fast. As expected from a Rider.

“Sol?”

“It would take too long to explain, so I won’t, but you *need* to trust me.” Sol’s hold tightens against Yohan’s biceps. “We’re in danger,” he tells the knight, even when he isn’t quite sure of his words. “We need to leave.”

Do they? Sol wonders. *Must they?*

“Right now?”

What if it was all a dream?

“Uh...” Sol ponders on his words for a moment, he is still in the midst of catching his bearings, after awakening again for what feels like the third time tonight. “In the next hour”—he cringes—“if possible?” *He hopes he is not making a mistake.*

“Oh, well, that’s plenty of time!” Yohan scoffs as he presses his hands to his hips. He acts as if he used to packing and scurrying off in the dead of night.

Perhaps, he is. But...

Plenty of time? Sol begs to differ.

One, single hour to keep his life fills him with an anxious dread he cannot even begin to explain. *He is glad his traveling companion feels confident, at least.*

“And here I thought we may have to leave right this second!” The knight laughs, before he pauses for a moment to stare at Sol. “Sol, are you all right?”

Sol’s shoulders tense. He almost jumps out of crouching. “W-Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Did you have a nightmare? You are...” Yohan doesn’t finish his phrase, however he doesn’t need to, Sol knows what he was likely about to say: *You’re drenched. You look feverish.*

And Sol wonders if he might not be, his cheeks burn, after that strange little encounter.

He stares out into the distance and thinks back to the stream, the nymph—reality and reverie, all blended as one. “Um...” Sol’s lower lip twitches. “Don’t worry yourself with that, for now, let’s just get going.”

As they both rise then grab their belongings, Sol doesn’t leave with regrets, only... with the mortifying knowledge that, if properly tempted, he may be quite the fool. Whilst he and Yohan walk the roads to their next stop, Sol rubs his hands together to find warmth, and feels the dense lines from the rocks in the riverside still etched into his skin.

* * *

When Sol and Yohan collapse again miles later, dawn is breaking in the sky, a violet bruise duvet covering starlight. Yohan is slightly out of breath whilst Sol is panting for air as he lays flat on his back, with his limbs splayed out like an overgrown starfish. Sol can't remember the last time he walked for so long—nor if he ever did—but every single part of his body aches with a tense pain. His mind buzzes with recipes for potions that could relieve him, yet, it is hard to think when he is so hungry and tired and sore. “I hate this.” His eyes roll to where Yohan is seated, drinking from one of the vials containing their water. “How are you not exhausted?”

Yohan raises a brow at Sol. “From such a short walk?” He frowns. “I once went two days without food nor sleep, all the while traveling a distance much greater than this!”

“But everything hurts...” Sol groans, his cheek is pressed to the ground and there is dirt on his skin; though, he cannot bring himself to care anymore.

Yohan cocks his head sideways. “Are you injured?”

“I...” Sol shakes his head. “I don't think so.” Yet as he says this, Sol finally moves and realizes how much he is hurting, to an unnatural extent. “Shit.” Swearing isn't proper etiquette, and Sol is certain his mentor would have his head if he could hear him, but right now Sol cannot give less of a damn. He stares at the sky, his gaze darkening. “I can't go on.”

However, beside him, Yohan only laughs as he shuffles through his own backpack. “Come now, no need to give up on life yet.” From his belongings, the knight takes out a small glass container, some olive oil, and his tent that they'd packed up earlier. “Your muscles are just stiff from walking all night. That's all.”

Sol observes his traveling companion in silence as Yohan raises his tent once more. The knight turns then looks to Sol, his arms a tad tense by his sides. “I can carry you inside so you can take a nap. But, if you wish it so...” Yohan places a palm over his own chest, his tone grows a tad more serious. “At the King's orders, I once trained beside the best healers in the land. I am quite skilled at giving massages, and relieved my companions of any pain they had incurred, more times than I can recall!” He clears his throat. “Of course, I would understand if you aren't comfortable with—”

“Do it,” Sol mutters under his breath as he shuts his eyes in defeat. Usually, he would abstain from letting others see or touch his body: but last night wasn't

usually, nor is today.

Right now, Sol's only wish is to be able to move around properly again, he would hate for some bandits or a wild animal to take them both by surprise in the sorry state he's stuck in.

This small sacrifice of discomfort will be well worth it.

"Excuse me, then," Yohan says under his breath as he lifts Sol into his arms then kneels. He shifts them both into the tent. "I'll lay you down in the middle, is that all right?"

Sol nods, snug inside Yohan's arms. He cannot do anything but be held without moving. It is an odd thing, to be cared for like this. He honestly thought he would hate it more.

Once Sol is laying across Yohan's sleeping bag, Yohan clears his throat and stares at him a tad awkwardly. "How much are you comfortable with taking off?"

"Oh. Um." Sol stares at him blankly for a moment. This part, he hadn't quite considered.

"You can keep your undergarments on, that isn't a problem," Yohan adds. "But since I will be using oil, your robe might be..."

"W-Well—" Sol would indeed, rather not dirty his cloak; it is one crafted for mages particularly, a memento from his twenty-fourth birthday, one he is certain cost his mentor a fortune. "I'll be laying on my stomach anyway, right?"

"Yes, of course. And I won't look." Yohan shows him a curt nod. "No need to worry about that."

Sol gulps. He isn't so worried that Yohan will look per se, but rather, about his own choice of clothes. Because Sol would rather forget the way his chest curves underneath his robes, he has picked up the tendency to wear an extra, tighter undershirt beneath them. He worries Yohan would notice and, somehow, figure Sol out. *But how would he even guess?* Sol catches himself in his strange line of thinking: clearly, he is being paranoid.

It is not like Sol's most private feelings are an obvious target painted on his back. *At worst*, Yohan would deduce Sol is merely being practical for his travels. *He would not conclude that Sol covers a deep, private secret: that he is a man.*

"Sure, I can take it off. H-However...you may have to help me."

"Oh." Yohan shifts as he moves towards him. "Of course."

For a moment, Sol holds his breath. Yet, he quickly exhales again—the act of being undressed by Yohan is a lot more monotonous than Sol expected. He isn't sure why he was so worried, this merely feels as though he is being attended to by a healer, not the man of his dreams. He supposes that is a good thing, he isn't sure what he would have done with himself if he weren't able to keep his composure.

Sol wriggles out of what is left of his clothes. As he lays on his stomach, Sol listens to the sounds of balms and potions clinking as they are twisted open by Yohan. A sigh escapes him. As calm as he is, his heart beats a little faster, beset by a familiar fear. Sol presses his lips together. "If it feels strange, you'll stop, right?"

The sounds come to a halt. Yohan's shoulders rise as they tense. "Yes?" Yohan sounds confused. "Why wouldn't I stop?" Yohan's laughter is awkward. "This is for you, Sol. Feel free to change your mind at any time"

Sol doesn't know what compelled him to ask such a question in the first place, the answer was obvious. "Thanks..." *Still, part of him needed to hear it.* His heart is finally quiet again.

When Yohan puts his hands on him, Sol cannot help the hiss of relief that leaves his lips. The healing balm is cool, yet soothing as it seeps into his skin, Sol can already feel it working its magic. *He was lucky Yohan had some to spare.*

"How is that?" Yohan asks as he rolls the edge of his palms across Sol's shoulder blades. "Does it hurt?"

"Yes, but..." Sol cannot help but relax under his touches as his eyes flutter shut. "In a good way."

"Spoken like a true warrior," the knight chuckles.

Sol huffs. "You know what I meant."

"Still—" Yohan mutters. "Do you walk around enough during work? You're so *tense*." He slips his hands down to massage Sol's arms this time, and the pressure has Sol's eyes rolling. Sol is probably making a rather doltish face right now; he thanks the gods Yohan can't see it. "All this tension doesn't feel like it's only from today."

"I mean, not always... I forget, sometimes." Sol leans into Yohan's touch as he thinks back to his life in Featherlaine. "I get really into what I'm doing. Before I know it, I'm often hunched over my desk for the next twelve hours." *Perhaps, he should be paying more attention to that...*

“Ah. I see. That would do it.” The way Yohan slides his hands across Sol’s body is completely different from how the nymph had touched him last night. “Consider taking breaks, if you can.” Yohan’s touch is gentle, sober, like a comforting hug.

“Thanks,” Sol shuts his eyes. “I’ll consider it...” he mutters.

Any apprehensions or nerves Sol may have had simply fade away, after a few minutes. The knight was not lying—he is quite good at this. *Sol feels like he is floating.*

When Yohan runs his fingers down Sol’s spine, Sol finds himself trembling, he bites into his lower lip as it quivers. *Gods, his hands are big.*

Perhaps now is *not the moment* to recall the visions, but in his half-awake, half-asleep daze Sol’s mind drifts, then reminiscences on the feel of being underneath Yohan. *Of Yohan being so caring, so tender, as he is now.* The closer Sol grows to the knight, the more he realizes how close to Yohan’s image those dreams truly were.

This scares him.

It scares him—what could become of them.

What if he will end up sleeping with him—what then?

As if juxtaposed atop Yohan’s touch which glides down to his legs, there lays the abrasive memory of being preyed on by that man. A cold hand on his thigh, the gross prick of a wet tongue, rancid breath by his ear *and...*

Sol tenses. *No. No— He doesn’t want to remember.* Suddenly, he cannot breathe: he is all tears, pinned to the past like an insect again. “I-I’m sorry. I can’t anymore.” Sol shrinks away from Yohan’s touch, into himself and the ground. *He doesn’t want to remember.* The fleeting thought of thanking Yohan wades through his mind, but his head buzzes with grief. *He doesn’t want to remember.* “Please don’t touch me.” *He wishes he could rip himself out of that horrid memory.*

Yohan immediately pulls away; it is of an odd little comfort to Sol that this knight, who is so strong and could overpower him at will, listened. “Sol, do you feel ill?”

Sol shakes his head. He cannot bring himself to face Yohan. It is humiliating, to feel this way. To *still* feel this way. *When will it stop?* “I’m sorry,” he pants. “I’m sorry.” And Gods, how he wishes he could put his clothes back on. *How he wishes he could run away and disappear, and—*

Soft warmth covers his back. “It’s a towel,” Yohan’s voice supplies, before Sol has a chance to ask. “You were shaking. I figured it may help.”

“Oh.” The air is thin again. It does not feel as thick, as suffocating, like two hands wrapped around his neck. “Thank you...” *What will Sol tell him now?* he wonders. He does not owe Yohan his history, *but...* “It’s nothing that you did, if you’re worried.” Sol is breathless but he is trying, very hard, to put himself back together. “The massage was nice. It helped. Thank you.”

He doesn’t want to fall apart; not here, in the middle of gods only know where.

“What can I do?” Yohan’s voice is softer than Sol expects.

“I-I... I don’t know.” Sol opens his eyes, only to be faced with a mountain of dark fabric, the sleeping bag’s many creases. “This rarely happens.” *Because I don’t let anyone touch my thighs.* “I just remembered something... unpleasant.” Sol knows *unpleasant* is truly not the right word for such a defiling experience that sometimes feels as though it has tainted his soul. *But he has never spoken of this to another person before.* He’d wanted to ignore it, he’d hoped everything in relation to what he went through that day would go away, just like he immediately packed his bags on that sordid morning. Sol had left early without notice, it was cold and all he could see for miles were his breaths, that materialized quietly in the air—still, the winter greeted him with more warmth than he’d felt indoors, inside that dreaded institution for mages.

In the snow, Sol walked for hours until he’d reached the port. He snuck onto a boat, waited for it to finally find the mainlands that led straight to his mentor, the only person he’d met during his studies who still felt worthy of his trust.

Sol had yearned to be a grand mage, a servant to his people, a researcher dedicated dearly to his craft—but, *if this is what it meant to be exalted, he didn’t want it anymore.* He’d been young and impressionable, and his fall to reality was like one’s final breaths: long, drawn out.

Sol doesn’t want to tell Yohan with words, so instead, he opens his heart that weeps with sorrow. He reaches for the knight with magic tinged by the pain in his soul. There is a slight tug on the invisible fabric of *life* that binds them but soon, it is pliant, bending and letting the feelings caged within Sol’s mind and body awry. And for a brief instant, Sol feels as though they are one. He takes a deep breath, then *thinks*, of all the things he would have wanted to say.

Of all the pain he cannot find the bravery to voice aloud.

Sol hopes, his feelings will get through to Yohan.

The knight grows a tad more quiet, as if listening to the wind, he brings his knees to his chest. “I...” Yohan lets out a woeful sigh. “I am sorry he still burdens you,” he whispers.

Sol is surprised Yohan understood that much. Though all magic is borne from emotion, unless one is of elven-descent, it is far from easy to bridge a connection to another whom you barely know. Sol wonders if Yohan was better receptive simply due to the Old King’s Curse that flows through him—after all, if the legends speak true, the knight is more ancient magic than man.

That... or Yohan and Sol’s own magic share a rare compatibility for reasons he ignores.

In a moment of curiosity, Sol tries to reach back into the link they once shared. But Yohan’s heart is sealed now—at least, most of it is. The knight’s lips curl into a comforting smile, as he shuts his eyes, he allows for Sol to explore him from a distance that feels... *safe* again.

Sol listens to the knight’s pulse, he tries to breathe alongside it. The sound is a solace, a welcome manner of being close to Yohan, without the need for touch as they once knew it. Slowly, softly, Yohan’s heartbeats lull Sol to sleep. *He knows this, at least, is not a dream.* A pulse from the knight is the only thing the visions could not give him.

It is hard to say for how long he rests—yet for once, Sol’s dreams are not plagued by the nightmares of vile, frosted pale cerulean hands grabbing at his limbs.

By the time Sol opens his eyes again, he is in Yohan’s arms.

Yohan is staring down at him, apologetically. “We both fell asleep at some point and ended up like this...” The knight averts his gaze, and Sol can feel Yohan’s hold on him loosening. “Sorry, I didn’t want to wake you.” He prepares himself to pull away. “I’ll go now—”

But Sol makes a fist in the fabric of Yohan’s tunic. He tilts his head downward, until his nose is pressed to Yohan’s chest. *Gods, what is he doing?* Sol’s heart races. *Gods, Yohan’s so close. This feels like a dream, a vision—Sol cannot help but wonder if it is.* “It was nice,” Sol blurts, “I didn’t hate it.” He pauses to take a breath. “Unless... you did?”

Under his fingertips, Yohan's pulse thrums against his skin. *So...* Sol blinks as a warm flush spreads across his face and he stares downward, avoiding Yohan's gaze. *Definitely not a dream.*

"No," Yohan settles back down, he lets Sol rest in his arms. "No, I do not dislike this—dislike you," Yohan clears his throat. "But I—" His breaths catch. "Sol, you are..."

"Huh?" Sol asks as the haze of his fatigue begins to fade away. He eventually looks Yohan straight in the eye, and realizes. *Oh.*

Oh *no.*

The towel from yesterday has fallen off.

Sol quickly pats around the sleeping bag to find its edge, that quickly pulls up to cover himself. His ears are hot. It is odd how everything has gone back to normalcy, and likely will remain as such now, as long as Yohan doesn't lay a hand on Sol's bare legs—Sol has always found it strange, how this process works.

"I apologize for the..." Sol cringes. "Indecency?"

Yohan merely shrugs at the comment. "Nothing indecent about a body."

Well, as long as it didn't bother him. Sol shuts his eyes. He leans into Yohan; it is easiest to find comfort in the knight, when it feels like they've already done this thousands of times. "I feel sleepy again."

Yohan tenses against him, ever so slightly, and Sol worries he may have said something wrong. "Sol?" the knight asks. "Could I touch you?"

"T-Touch?" Sol isn't quite sure how to feel anymore. He freezes. *What does Yohan mean by that?* "H-How—"

The knight's face reddens and he shakes his head. "No—not like that!" His lips part in an awkward, apologetic show; it is likely Yohan has noticed the nerves in his voice. "Merely...hugs and all. Nothing more than that. Since we are already..."

"Ah."

"But if I'm getting ahead of myself, please decline."

Is he? Sol wonders, when he is the one who is naked in Yohan's arms, clinging to him like a fruit bat. "Can I... touch you, too?" Sol is dizzy. He does not know what has possessed him. But his chest feels as if it is about to burst, amid the loud, ribcage pounding of his pulse.

“You may.” Yohan smiles and brushes stray chestnut strands out of Sol’s face. “You can.”

Tentatively, Sol reaches out and runs an open palm down Yohan’s chest. “You’re... very muscular.” Sol didn’t want to keep silent out of fear of making things awkward—but now, Yohan is laughing.

“I have to be.” Yohan runs his fingers through Sol’s hair; Sol leans into it. Into him. His breaths hitch, ever so slightly, the warmth of Yohan’s hands on him a blissful sensation. “Dying on the battlefield would be quite unpleasant.” Yohan is so gentle when he handles him, his touch is soft sunlight in the summer, it raises Sol’s heart aflutter.

“I see.” For a moment, Sol loses himself. He glances up at Yohan through lidded eyes. He wants to kiss him. *But, something about that is more terrifying than the entire prospect of this journey far from home—like he would be far from himself, too, if he dared delve into their connection any deeper.*

Yohan brings his free hand to his own chest, and rests it atop Sol’s knuckles that had been laying there, tense. “We won’t do anything you don’t want to,” the knight tells Sol. “I am merely happy to be this way with you.” He thumbs at Sol’s jaw and smiles. “Are you not?”

“I am...” Sol swallows, hard, before he looks away. *Things have become... complicated.*

Even if there were signs from the start that he wanted Yohan and Yohan wanted him: he didn’t actually think things would end up this way.

Yohan’s features grow serious. “Sol, listen,” he says. “I know this may not be the right time for this.”

Right time? Sol’s pulse quickens, an apprehensive lump forms in his throat as his eyes widen, ever so slightly. *Right time for what?*

“When our spirits touched yesterday, I felt... *something*,” Yohan continues. “As if you were hiding; I can’t find better words to explain it, but it has been on my mind and I wanted to ask... are you all right? Is there anything I can do to help you?” He is earnest, that part is certain.

What a sweet man, Sol finds himself thinking, before the panic of having been discovered settles in his gut—and apparently, across his face, too.

Yohan’s expression falls. “Sol, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to overstep.” His brows arch up in a pained manner. “You don’t have to tell me.” Yohan continues

to *look*, directly at him, in a manner that makes Sol feel so irrevocably seen that it pushes the truth out of him.

“But I am,” Sol blurts the words before he can even think them through, like the dirty confession of a sin. “I am hiding.”

Yohan nods, slow as he listens, then looks into Sol’s eyes. “You are?” He thumbs at Sol’s jaw again and laughs. “But you are right here!”

Ah, an attempt to lighten up the mood? Sol thinks. For a Harbinger Of Malice, he sure is radiant.

Sol’s lower lip quivers. He *wants* to say it, yet the words stick to his palate. “Am I?” Sol forces a smile. *It is a good question, one to which he does not have an answer to.* “Sometimes, I feel as though I have never existed.”

Yohan’s playful expression fades once he pauses to observe Sol in silence. “Sol...” He lowers his voice. “You talk as if you’ve been cursed.”

“That would be one way to describe it.”

Outside, the wind rises. The sun leaves the sky, dragging away goldlight that had once bathed their tent in warmth away, and replacing it with the faint *pitter-patter* of rain.

Perhaps, it is folly to go down this path—still, Sol’s heart has gone wild with freedom, so he embraces Yohan and he spills out the truth. “Ever since I could remember, I’ve always felt like a man.” Sol’s pulse is loud; with his chest pressed to Yohan’s, he has no doubt the knight can hear it all. “You’re the only person who knows.”

His breaths fall heavy atop Yohan’s shoulder. Sol’s eyes are wide. He’s gripping at the shirt over Yohan’s back in search of relief. And then, with fear. *Because what if the visions were wrong?*

What if Yohan was simply calling Sol Sol in those dreams just like he is now, without thinking of Sol as a man?

He should have thought things through.

But he doesn’t need to—for it isn’t long before Yohan hugs him back. “Hi, Sol,” he mumbles, his hot breaths falling against Sol’s neck in turn. “It’s nice to meet you.”

Sol didn’t think it was possible to hold onto Yohan any more than he did, however, he does. And Yohan caresses the back of his head. Yohan presses his

lips to Sol's eyelid where Sol's tear slips down across his mouth. Sol makes a fist in Yohan's shirt. And he exists. *He exists. He exists.*

* * *

"You didn't find it strange." Sol stares at the tent's thin ceiling, at the raindrops breaking in two and sliding down wet tarp. His hands are rested against his stomach. By his side, Yohan lays in a similar position, with his shoulders touching Sol's. They are stuck here until the rain ceases to fall: traveling under these conditions wouldn't be wise.

"I have definitely witnessed stranger..." Yohan says. He is still looking up at the hidden sky, but now Sol stares at him.

Handsome, Sol thinks. So, so handsome, and dreamy.

"There was once a fish who was actually a cursed man; I needed to speak with a sunflower who was in fact a witch, to free—" Yohan turns his head then takes notice of Sol. "Oh." The knight's lips curve into a satisfied grin.

And heat rises to Sol's face. *Is there wanting in him, too?* For Sol certainly feels that way, in his mind and in his body.

"Yes, Sol?" Yohan chuckles. "How may I help you, my sweet?"

Sol's heart stirs at the nickname. "I want to be kissed."

Yohan is laying on his side now, with his elbow propping him upward, his head rested against his palm. He reaches for Sol's waist and pulls him in closer. Sol doesn't know what they are doing, nor why they have started whatever *this* is. He wonders if they've been lonely—if Yohan was also as starved for touch, like Sol who often ached to be embraced, yet could not find a soul to trust. "How?" Yohan breathes the word, hot into Sol's skin as he leans forward, then into him. "How should I kiss you?" Their eyes meet.

But Sol looks away. "I don't know."

"You..." Yohan's voice trails off. "Truly don't?" There is no judgment in his tone, though, the knight seems a tad surprised.

Around them the rain falls heavier by the minute, dew clings to the tent's roof as Sol does to Yohan—he runs a hand up Yohan's neck, tentatively, he cups Yohan's jaw then rests a thumb against the knight's chin. Sol stares at Yohan

through lidded eyes. “I’ve never been kissed before.” *At least*, he feels the warmth of a blush crawl across his face, *not here*.

Before Sol can look away again, Yohan has urged Sol’s thumb across his lower lip. He guides Sol’s hand, his grip powerful yet full of docility all the same as he lets Sol feel soft, supple pink skin Sol has dreamed of kissing for years. Yohan smiles. And Sol remains still, agape in fascination, transfixed on the mouth that he is about to taste. “I can do it slowly,” Yohan mutters against Sol’s finger, before he kisses Sol’s knuckles as he looks Sol straight in the eye, “like that.”

Sol’s breaths quiver. He leans, then topples forward, into the knight’s embrace—his lips crash into Yohan’s. He whimpers when Yohan’s large, warm hand settles against his back and moans into the knight’s mouth. Sol should stop. *He knows he should*. But he doesn’t want this to end, this strange, raw, ephemeral moment that will soon be lost to time.

Yohan feels better than anything he has ever felt before.

“Yohan,” Sol pants. “Yohan—”

Yohan traces the hind of Sol’s neck with his fingertips. He growls, “*Sol*,” and Sol’s knee jerks, his back arches off the ground instinctively. He can scarcely hear the rain anymore through the sound of their heartbeats; he breathes in the scent of Yohan, of the petrichor in the air.

He takes it all in.

When they pull away again, two tides drawn back into the vastness of the ocean, Yohan caresses the side of Sol’s face with slow, gentle touches. He looks to Sol for answers. “How was that?”

Sol barely registers the words over the sound of his own beating heart, thumping through his throat, the blood that rushes to his ears. He kissed someone. *He kissed Yohan*. He blinks twice, in a daze as if having just woken from a dream. Sol grounds himself to the feel of his palm resting atop Yohan’s elbow, he presses his own lips together, so that they may spare him in the way they tremble so. “My heart can’t stop beating.”

Yohan raises a brow in amusement at him. “I should hope so, my dear.” A chuckle reverberates down his throat. Yohan takes a piece of Sol’s hair, he slips it behind Sol’s ear. “You’ve a long life ahead of you, after all.”

Sol yearns for another kiss when a sudden, strange unsettling fret swarms his mind. Now, he daren't ask for more. *If Yohan were a wyvern, Sol would have strayed dangerously close to the beast's lair today, he needn't go inside.*

But he wants to.

But he won't.

He leans back slightly, though, not enough to stray from Yohan's arms.

There is an odd comfort in being connected like this, skin to skin, heart to heart. Sol wonders if he could ever get used to this—playing with untamed fire, without ever worrying about whether or not he will burn. “Is this really okay?” he whispers, as he locks his hands with Yohan's, and stares to the tarp that moves alongside the howling of the wind. Sol swallows, but his throat is tight. “This is all... very new. I worry my lack of—well, *everything*, may complicate things.”

I worry the relationship I have with my body will affect the relationship I could have with you.

Yet, Yohan only lets out a light, doting chuckle. “I am one of the Old King's Cursed Riders, *complicated* is second nature to me.”

Sol hums. “Maybe...” He rests his head against Yohan's and thinks of the future, of the stars and uncertain destiny. “Right now though, you're just Yohan.”

Yohan wraps his arm around Sol's shoulder and kisses the crown of Sol's head, he grins. “And you're just Sol.”

Sol shuts his eyes. He laughs, “Yes.” Sunlight trickles through clouds above, and the rains lighten across the lands.

* * *

“Well, shit.” Sol stares at his bag—or rather, the lack thereof. Amid the empty space where his tent should have stood, stands a replacement that takes the shape of a tiny, pitiful pebble. His robe, too, is missing. The only reprieve from the elements Sol has being one of Yohan's spare shirts now, its thick fabric draped across his shoulders, long and large enough to serve him as a makeshift dress. “We either ran into a very bored and talented mage, or some bastard bandits.”

Yohan scoffs as he inspects the scene in turn. “Definitely the mage.”

Sol's eyebrow twitches as he continues to stare at the ground in disbelief, where a thin coating of sparkling rosy powder still shimmers inside the dirt. "Definitely." He shouldn't have left his belongings outside. *He should have remembered it was hazing season.* "Gods, what now?"

Yohan pauses. "I'm sorry about your robe."

"It's all right..." Sol reaches for Yohan's sleeve and gives it a small tug. He smiles at the knight. "At least we're both unscathed."

They both stare at each other in silence for a moment. Until Yohan finally parts his lips. "Regarding the remainder of our arrangements for the journey... My tent is big enough for two, if you are comfortable. Not to mention, the next inn isn't too far off. Or, I could sleep outside tonight, if that is—"

"D-Don't be ridiculous!" Sol averts his gaze. He bites into his lip, then brings a hand to his own elbow and squeezes.

The idea of sleeping next to Yohan *intentionally*, every night, makes Sol *feel* in ways much different than merely passing out beside him in accident. *But...* "I just can't let you sleep out here. It'd be much too dangerous." Sol raises his eyes until he's looking at Yohan again. Something heavy grips at his gut.

Sol's mind swims with blurred memories of his old teacher treating him with kindness, only to follow those actions with betrayal of the foulest kind. Poison. Lies. *What if Yohan is like that, too?* Sol hates himself for thinking so, however he cannot help it. *The visions only showed him so much—a good time, a fleeting temporary moment—who knows what may await them in the weeks to come, after that?*

But the fact that this night hasn't occurred yet reassures Sol, for it means that up until then, at the least, everything will be okay. *He is safe.*

"Sol?" Yohan leans forward to get a better look at him. "If you would like to tie me up while we sleep, I have no qualms against that."

"Yohan!" Sol cringes. "What..." His voice trails off. "What a dismal idea." He sighs with a smile, then looks to the ground, before he faces Yohan once more. "If we are attacked again, you can't rely on an apothecary to defend you while you are tied up, Harbinger of Malice."

"Oh?" Yohan grins. "So, I am not just Yohan anymore?"

"Of course you are, you fool."

As the comforting sound of Yohan's laughter fills the space between them, guilt threads itself through Sol's heart; he lets out a breath he hadn't realized to be holding. He wonders how he could have ever doubted him. It isn't that simple, of course, but... *Sol wishes he could heal.*

He wishes he could trust Yohan like the Sol from his visions and his dreams trusted him.

Yohan clears his throat. "Shall we pack away our belongings and make for our next stop, then?" he says.

The knight needn't ask him twice, Sol is more than happy to agree. "Please," Sol tells him as he stretches his arms to the sky. He was growing quite weary of laying around in a tent and letting his anxiety consume him, getting on the road on such a nice day sounds like it will be a much needed change of pace. "Let's go."

The two travel through fields of sunflower and gold wheat, sometimes adjoining hands for a brief moment, whenever their fingers accidentally touch. "Say..." Sol mutters as he squeezes Yohan's palm. "Something's...been on my mind." *He hadn't wanted to say it nor linger on the matter, out of fear that it would ruin the moments they've shared together; but amid the quiet, burning questions only grow louder in Sol's head.* "Can I ask you something?"

Yohan squeezes back. "Of course, Sol."

And Sol pauses, takes a breath, before he blurts, "Even though you told me you only enjoy men's company in that way, you were interested in me when you thought I was a woman, and it confuses me. I worry..." He bites into his lower lip. "I worry..."

That you might actually see me in that light—why is it so hard to say it?

Sol soon realizes he has no need to properly formulate the question, however, for Yohan seems to understand. "Oh, that?" The knight scratches at the back of his head and chuckles. "I must admit, even before you told me, there was a certain air of masculinity about you...it attracted me. And there is... *something else*, but perhaps, that talk is better left for another hour." As warm, orange tones settle in the sky, Yohan points toward the village they'd sought to find. "We've arrived."

As much as he is curious, whatever Yohan was about to tell him didn't seem all that important, Sol supposes it can wait.

At least, for now.

They walk a tad further, until they arrive safe and sound within the village walls. Yohan looks around in silence and takes one long, hard glance at their new surroundings. He squints, then hums. “I fear it may be a tad too late to question the villagers at this hour.”

He’s right, everyone seems to be rushing back home for dinner, as most of the shops close down for the day. Sol’s brows arch upward, a pained cringe takes his features. “Will the King be all right?” They aren’t traveling slowly—far from that—still, Sol wonders if they should consider working through the nights.

“Let’s say he is holding on.” Yohan immediately heads toward an inn he’d been eyeing, without giving it second thought. “We’ve healers back at the palace caring for him night and day. Granted...” he mutters before he takes a step inside the aged building. “For His Majesty’s sake, it would be best to hurry, so that we may put a halt to his sufferings. But he will not perish so soon, that is for certain. And we...” Yohan turns back to gaze at Sol. “We shouldn’t be lenient when it comes to resting either, our deaths would doom him, too, remember that.”

Behind him, Sol gulps as he follows Yohan in. “I see...” He grasps at the strands that adorn his shoulder. “I will be quick to make that potion, then.”

“Be thorough,” Yohan tells him, his voice earnest and clear. “If you can be quick, that is appreciated. But we would rather you take your time, if it means better results from the medicine you’ll craft.”

“O-Of course! Of course, I’ll... do my best.” Perhaps the gravity of the situation should have occurred to Sol much earlier, however, having the weight of a King’s life in his hands is only starting to dawn on him now. *And what a terrifying thought that is.* As Sol walks forth, he can only pray he will manage and that the ingredients he is to fetch will not, for some odd reason, be less potent than their usual counterparts. He would hate to be executed for failure. *Not that Sol planned to fail, he knows the recipe by heart, has recited it many a time in his mind, but still—*

Sol runs into Yohan’s back with a yelp. “I’ll— M-Make the greatest potion ever!” he blurts with a shaken voice.

Yohan stares at him from over his shoulder, with confusion written all over his features. “What? I was merely asking if you wanted to share a room.”

“Ah.” Sol forces out a laugh then scratches at the back of his head. “Are there any left with two separate beds? If so, that might be more... convenient.”

“Are you certain, Sol?” Yohan stares at him, he pauses for a moment, until he parts his lips again. “His Majesty is funding this entire trip—if you wish for a separate room, we can certainly arrange for that.”

Sol blinks, then presses his lips together. “That is... You wouldn’t be offended?”

Yohan squints. “Please,” he laughs. “I am not that juvenile.”

Red warmth flushes Sol’s cheeks. “Right.” He shows Yohan a subtle nod before staring at the floorboards. “Then, a second room would be best, please. Thank you, Yohan.”

Yohan leans forward to stroke his hair softly. “No need to thank me. You are the one aiding me and our Kingdom, Sol. It is quite all right.” He turns to the counter again to speak with the innkeeper.

Sol watches the knight in silence. He takes in the bustling sounds of the inn’s customers, who order more pints of ale at the bar, their shouts echoing across the quaint rustic entrance.

The flames from the lanterns all around reflect pale amber against Yohan’s skin. Sol takes in the sight of him for a moment; he wonders what sort of story the lines across his face tell, what sort of life Yohan has lived up until now, when their paths only just so happened to cross.

Yohan turns towards him again and holds up two sets of keys. He hands one set to Sol and smiles. “I managed to get two that are beside each other! I... hope that is all right by you?”

“More than fine,” Sol tells him. In truth, although Sol did not want to share a room, he had hoped they wouldn’t be too far from one another.

The two walk up to the second floor without wasting much time near the bar. When they both stand before their own respective rooms, Sol reaches for Yohan’s hand. *Why, he doesn’t know—it is like instinct, fate, pulling him towards this man.*

Yohan grins and tilts his head to get a better look at Sol. “What do you want to do, my sweet?” His tone is so loving and soft, that the fear around Sol’s heart can only melt.

Sol stares up at Yohan and bites his lip. “Wanna... come in?”

Yohan steps forward. He wraps his arms around Sol and pulls him into a warm embrace. “I would love to, Sol.”

The floorboards creak beneath their boots as the two enter Sol's bedroom hand in hand. Sol catches a glimpse of the outside world from his window, where the nighttime view gives way to a tailor's boutique—behind the exposition glass, lit by magical ornaments hung inside the railings, are clothes on display; robes made for men working in the enchantment and apothecarial arts. Sol's attention cannot help but drift towards them. He has yearned to wear such a robe for so long, yet his concern for the stares of onlookers and whether it would even fit him—or float around awkwardly on his shoulders, as if he'd borrowed the robe for dress-up from an older mentor—have always held him back from getting one of his own.

"Should we buy it?" Yohan strides up beside him and observes the robe in all its glory, with his hands locked together behind his back. "I like it," he tells Sol. "I think that emerald shade would suit you."

Sol takes a step back and flicks a strand of his own hair behind his ear. "It's okay, to be honest..." he mumbles, "I know what I look like."

"And what is that?" Yohan questions. Sol wonders if the knight is humoring him.

"Like a woman." *Why must he make me say it?* He sighs. "Isn't it obvious?" Sol motions to himself with an angered sway of his hand. "Even you thought so at first, until I told you."

At Sol's statement, Yohan raises a brow. "I only thought so because you introduced yourself as Solange, the woman." The knight crosses his arms. "Had it been any other way, I wouldn't have—"

"Come on, Yohan, even when I don't introduce myself this way everyone assumes I-I'm..." Sol's voice trails off; he doesn't want to say it again. He's tired.

Perhaps, inviting Yohan inside his temporary room wasn't the best idea, after all.

The knight reaches for Sol's hand. "But, am I everyone?" He asks, and Sol cannot help the small breath he lets out, before their eyes meet again. "Am I, Sol?"

"N-No, but..." Sol looks away and bites his lip. "It's strange, that—" Sol stops himself. *Was he about to call a man strange for accepting him?*

"Strange?" Yohan raises his brows then scoffs. He releases Sol's hand. "Is it not the rest of the world that is odd for assuming they know everything about a person before ever meeting them?"

Sol ponders on the matter for a moment—he recalls the apprehensions he himself had held about the Old King’s Cursed Riders, and he wonders, if this is how Yohan’s worldview came to be.

He purses his lips together. “Well, maybe so... but that still doesn’t change that most people don’t think like you.” Sol’s shoulders tense, as do his fists by his sides. “I do not want to be mocked for looking ridiculous—or even worse, ostracized.”

Yohan sighs, he raises his arms and rests both his palms atop Sol’s shoulders. “Why not give it a go before resigning from the possibility of change?” he tells Sol. “Trying a simple robe on, in a foreign village, doesn’t pose much of a risk. The only people who might catch a glimpse of you wearing it would likely only be the tailor—and possibly myself, too, if the urge to show me takes you then.” The knight pauses. “Unless, I am mistaken, and you do not mind the current situation. In that case, there isn’t anything wrong with remaining as you are—”

“No!” Sol blurts the word before he can think. This conversation has brought up so many unpleasant feelings that have not bubbled to the surface of his life in years—*feelings he yearned to hide from himself.*

Because it is too painful to remember sometimes.

“No...” Sol whispers with his head hung low; his throat tightens into a dull, fretful knot. “I do. I do mind it, I think. But, I am so disconnected from myself, I barely feel my pain anymore. It’s...” A tear blurs his vision and falls down his jaw. Sol’s eyes widen as he wipes it away. “Numbing,” he says. “Sometimes, I wonder if what I feel is even true. I-I’m scared it might not be. And yet... it makes me so irrevocably happy, and fills me with the most joy when I am made to feel like a man. I—” Sol squeezes at his elbow. “I don’t know what to think. *Gods*, the elvenfolk would get a rise out of me if they saw this—most are so comfortable living as their true selves, and yet here I am, still confused and scared like some witless *fool* after all these years.”

Sol wraps his arms around himself, his fingers tremble as he hunches over nothing, he snuffles. “No wonder nobody takes me seriously.”

I can’t even take myself seriously.

Yohan steps forth and wraps his arms around Sol. And Sol loses himself in the knight’s embrace. He presses his face into Yohan’s chest and lets out an ugly, broken sob. These feelings he had kept locked away in the deepest part of his

heart, they are all pouring out of him like blood spills from an open wound—Sol can't keep them in anymore.

He can't. "Shit," Sol swears the word under his breath. "*Shit*, I was doing so well." *If only I had continued to ignore this, I could have been normal.*

I could have fit in.

I—

"Were you?" Yohan asks. He caresses the back of Sol's head. His hand is warm. "Were you doing well?" he echoes, before the two of them pull away and look to each other again; Yohan's palm lingers against Sol's jaw. "Weren't you just surviving?"

Sol's lower lip quivers. He doesn't know what to say. It is as though he has been shot through the heart with the land's greatest arrow—because it hurts. *It hurts. It hurts, to feel this.*

To feel *everything*, after having experienced a void, nothingness for so long, where it was neither cold nor warm. It just was. *He* just was.

He was Solange—at least, he tried to be.

He prayed every night that he would wake up—and that the odd, uncomfortable sentiment that tugged at his heart every waking hour of his life would one day come to disappear: if only he tried hard enough, to be *her*.

But deep down, Sol knew he never even got close.

He falls to his knees and away from Yohan, as he breaks down into an ugly, crooked sob. "No, *Gods*, why did it have to be this way?" Sol whimpers and holds his arms close to his chest as he keels over; his nose is so close to the floorboards he can smell its wooden scent. "I wish I wasn't Sol. Yohan, I wish—" He chokes on his grief. "Why was I not strong enough to push these desires away?"

"Sol..." Yohan sounds pained as he kneels then holds out his palm for Sol to take, their fingers meet atremble. "There are no desires here." He hushes him softly, until they both rise together again. Sol's head is lowered still. Yohan squeezes his hand. "It is human nature," the knight tells him. "It is in the nature of everyone, to be yourself, to gravitate towards that which makes one happiest."

Sol leans into him, and Yohan welcomes him with open arms as he rubs at Sol's back, Sol lays his head against the knight's shoulder. "Sol, you do not have to deny yourself happiness," he says. "You need not keep yourself from your truth, it is okay, to be Sol. Just like it is okay for me to be Yohan. And how it is

okay for your mentor to be Androcles.” Yohan kisses the crown of Sol’s head, he lowers his voice to a whisper. “It is okay, Sol.”

Sol heaves in another breath. “Yohan?” he asks weakly, as he wraps his arms around the knight’s back, he rests his cheek against his chest and listens to Yohan’s heart with closed weary eyes.

“Yes, Sol?”

Sol takes a deep breath. He parts his lips. *He didn’t think he would say this, but* — “Would you stay with me tonight?”

Sol needs him.

He needs Yohan.

* * *

Sol can scarcely remember the last time he ever cried so much—though, he has a feeling it was when he first got back from his studies, and hid behind the counter of his mentor’s old shop once he had reached the end of his journey for another home. “Shit, I’m so sorry...” Sol mumbles in bed as he rouses, and watches Yohan waking in turn, the two of them doused in warm golden light from a strip of sunheat that bleeds in through embroidered ivory curtains.

Yohan reaches for Sol, then thumbs at his cheek. “What for, dear heart?”

“I asked for two rooms, and yet we only ended up using one...”

“Nonsense.” Yohan takes Sol into his arms, a small, hushed chuckle escapes him. “It was a relief to have another room in case either of us needed the space. Do not worry yourself.” Though Yohan’s shirt is tinged with his sweat, it is odd, for Sol finds himself enjoying the scent of him.

“You are too kind to me,” Sol mumbles. He grasps at the fabric that lays over the knight’s chest, then stares down to his fist. “Thank you... for staying last night.”

Yohan slips his arms around Sol and moves, until Sol is on top of him, straddling his waist. “Sorry,” Yohan shows Sol an apologetic grin. “My back was hurting.”

“Oh.” Sol starts to lean away from him. “I can get off, if you—”

“No,” Yohan brushes the underside of Sol’s wrist with his fingertips. “I like it. You can stay, if it pleases you.”

Sol’s breaths catch in his throat. *More than please him, this is...* “May I touch you?” Sol knows it is only because he is still half-asleep that he finds the bravery to ask.

This is everything he has ever dreamed of.

Yohan’s eyes gloss upward, until he stares at Sol, a sudden curiosity swims in his gaze. “Where?”

Where indeed? Sol wonders. “Your chest? Your arms?” Sol whispers the words in a soft, tentative manner.

The knight reaches for Sol’s cheek, he nods, grins. “Touch me, then.”

And Sol does. He runs an open palm starting from Yohan’s clavicles down to his navel. His fingers dance across Yohan’s shoulders, skirt atop his arms—he pauses upon reaching the knight’s chest. In ways it feels softer than Sol had expected, yet still somewhat firm. “I like your body,” Sol mumbles; his tone is kept casual, as if he weren’t in the midst of complimenting Yohan, of touching every inch of him. “I’ve only known men as handsome in dreams.” Sol chuckles and tilts his head as he looks at him. “Is this a dream, Yohan?”

“If it is,” Yohan reaches for his elbow and wraps his big, warm hand around Sol’s skin. He chuckles. “Then, I do not wish to wake.” Sol can feel Yohan hardening as the knight’s erection nudges at his buttocks, it surprises him, how okay he is with his current predicament. He never thought he would be after that day.

But Sol finds himself flattered, to know his words have done this to Yohan. *At least, he supposes that’s what this is.* Being close to someone like this—someone he cherishes—is quite nice, after all.

“Ah...” Yohan’s face reddens, and he cringes ever so slightly, likely upon feeling himself push into Sol’s ass. “F-Forgive me, Sol.” Yohan urges Sol away from himself—and soon they lay facing each other once more, side by side. “Apologies.”

But Sol reaches for Yohan’s hand, and he stares to the ceiling, a smile taking his lips. “I’m fine, actually.” He blinks. “Do you feel unwell?” He cannot help himself from asking, for it is not hard to notice the subtle tremble of Yohan’s fingers against his.

"I will not hide that I am slightly ashamed..." Yohan turns his head away from Sol. He lowers his voice to a meek mumble. "Although it is far from easy to control, I wanted to meet you with more decency than this."

Sol shuts his eyes as a sigh escapes his lips. "You know, this is human nature, too—it has nothing to do with decency."

At the echo of his own wisdom, Yohan can only laugh. "Using my own words against me, I see." He shifts, then cups Sol's jaw with his palm, a mirthful grin tugging at his lips. "You coy devil." The two of them inch closer to one another, when Yohan's gaze falls upon Sol's mouth.

"Do you want to?" Sol asks him. "Kiss me, I mean." His own eyes grow lidded and heavy with a pure yearning for the knight.

"In this state?" Yohan raises a brow. He seems hesitant. *Hesitant, but interested.* It is clear he is considering the situation, and the weight that it bears. "You may feel *me* again, if we—"

"Then let me feel you," Sol blurts as he leans forward, ever so slightly. He glances away for a moment. "It's..." Sol sighs. "I am not adverse to sex, Yohan. It actually... quite interests me. But sometimes, I remember the past. And that makes me uneasy. And sex tends to be... what reminds me. So... it is complicated." When he speaks the words, Sol inadvertently finds himself reminded of old wounds; he bites into his lower lip. "That is all."

Yohan takes Sol's hand in his own. He holds it, for a moment.

His thumb caresses Sol's knuckles with a certain gentleness and care Sol isn't sure he will ever get used to. *He never thought it was possible—to be touched like this.*

"Would it be okay to ask you about that?" Yohan says, suddenly. He pauses against Sol's skin, and looks to Sol for a sign of malaise. "If it can be helped, I don't ever want to remind you again. And I fear I may have, back when I..."

Sol exhales a long breath of sorrow. "It's my thighs," he mutters, "if you touch my thighs with your hands. O-Or if you..." Sol wonders if it would be appropriate to even mention the act of sex, since they have only briefly kissed.

"If I?" Yohan observes him, waiting, patient.

"...with your fingers," Sol speaks the words under his quickening breaths. "If you ever put your f-fingers inside it may remind me. So, please—please don't do that." He knows he couldn't have possibly worded that in a more awkward

manner, but it is hard to think, when these dreadful memories play through his mind; when his body has tensed even when nothing is wrong.

“I won’t.”

Sol glances upward, rarely has he once seen Yohan look so serious throughout all their travels. Still he is grateful for this talk.

“I promise, I won’t.” Yohan squeezes Sol’s palm. And Sol embraces him deeply, his nose pressed into the crook of Yohan’s shoulder, he can feel himself falling. And wonders if it is bad. With the passing of each season, every single day, Sol pines more and more for this strange yet gentle, handsome knight.

* * *

The moment they enter the tailor’s shop, Sol wants to flee. The feeling does not come to him as a surprise—he has been running throughout the entirety of his life, after all, he has become quite good at that.

And yet today, having Yohan by his side gives him the courage to stay.

“Hello!” Yohan calls the tailor over with an enthusiastic wave of his hand, and Sol’s stomach drops to the ground. He fears he is going to be ill.

He resists the urge to hide behind his knight, for it isn’t as if that could render him invisible now. They are already here. “H-Hello,” Sol greets the tailor in turn with a brief, polite nod. He motions to the clothes he’d spotted last night from the inn’s window. “The robe at the front of your store is it, perchance, for sale?”

The tailor walks on over to them with a smile full of glee. “Ah! That one?” His cheeks are red with the joy of a man surrounded by years of his own hard work, and the passion of knowing it is his livelihood. Sol supposes, he can relate—he and Androcles both feel the same sorts of highs when it comes to the apothecarial arts. “You have a good eye, my friend!” The tailor exclaims as he leans in then readjusts his glasses, he stares at Sol with a hum. “Is it for you? A gift?”

“It’s...” Sol gulps. “For me.” He pauses, then shifts on his feet. “If it isn’t too much trouble, would it be possible to try it on?” *Too fast. He is speaking too fast.*

“Of course!” The tailor ushers Sol further into the store’s depths. “Right this way, miss!”

Sol stops. His heart is pounding in his ears as he cannot help but wonder... *What now?* Sol stares to Yohan for help, but Yohan’s face has paled, too.

The lingering idea that he likely won’t ever visit this village again flashes through Sol’s mind. Sol takes a deep breath.

He supposes, this will not be as painful as it could be. “Actually, I’m—”

A man? Is that what Sol was about to say?

With this hair and his current attire? How could he possibly claim—

“He’s a man,” Yohan clears his throat as he wraps an arm around Sol’s shoulder. “People are often mistaken!”

“Oh! Oh dear.” The tailor chokes on his spit, and Sol suddenly feels a tad sorry for him.

“Excuse me—young man.” The tailor readjusts his glasses across his nose again. “I have been meaning to get these changed lately, they are a tad scratched. Well!” He exclaims before motioning for Sol to come. “Follow me, young man, why don’t you?”

Sol’s face warms with a bashful tint, yet as he looks back to Yohan who nods approvingly, Sol can only trace the tailor’s steps in acceptance, *he supposes, this is happening.*

He isn’t sure whether to thank Yohan or call him a fool, still, Sol is surprised at how... *well* this is going. The tailor didn’t question him at all. *Could this be because of his elven heritage?* Sol wonders. *Elvenfolk are known for their androgynous traits—is that why the man judges him less?*

Or are most people like Yohan, after all?

Sol is led to a dressing room built from fine wood. The tailor leaves his side for a moment, only to return seconds later after having plucked the robe from its mannequin at the forefront of the boutique. “Here”—the tailor hands the cloth to Sol, it feels rich in light, silken ways between his hands—“please, take your time.”

Sol is alone now in the dressing room, his heart beats rhymes of an old timeless dream in his ears. *So much is happening all at once, his mind barely has time to follow.* There is hesitation at first when he undresses, yet nevertheless Sol changes, slipping the robe past his shoulders before he leaves the dressing room.

Sol walks back to the front of the boutique again, when the tailor shows him a smile much more earnest than what Sol would've expected. He leads Sol towards a mirror. Sol's boots sink into the elaborate rug that covers the ground. He shuts his eyes.

He wonders why he is so afraid of looking. *Perhaps it is because he will be laid before himself here—and it is a scary thing, to be vulnerable, to feel like this.*

"Have a look!" the tailor exclaims. "What do you think, young man?"

Behind them, Yohan chimes, "I personally feel it is a fine choice!"

The two of them sound enthusiastic enough—it is the push Sol needs to finally gaze at himself for once, for real.

"Oh, wow." Sol freezes: the robe doesn't look half as bad as he'd assumed it would on him. Though it doesn't quite fit him at the shoulders, it does not appear out of place either—Sol finds that he quite wants to go home with the robe, in fact. "I like it." A smirk takes his lips as Sol stares at himself in silence for a little while longer.

So, this is what it feels like to wear something comfortable, and not a garment you are forced to bear? He feels he could get used to this: the joy of being himself.

"Glad to hear it, my friend!" The tailor pats him on the back as he lets out a burly laugh. He presses his lips together then squints as he observes the shape of the robe, how it falls on Sol's back. "Hm, I suppose it wouldn't hurt to make a few adjustments," he mutters under his breath, "would that be all right with you?"

Sol grimaces when the thought of how much that will likely cost him, on top of the robe itself, comes to tickle his mind. "Well... that depends." He cannot believe he is actually considering this. "How long might that take?" In theory, Sol could definitely spend a little extra—he has well enough gold in his savings to allow himself the treat.

However, what Sol would *not* want, would be for this distraction to get in the way of the King's treatment.

If it is to take until the next sunrise, he will likely have to let this robe go.

"A few hours at most!" The tailor finally exclaims. "One hour at best!" The elderly man clears his throat with a fist pressed to his lips. "I *do* pride myself on keeping the wait times for my clients to a minimum—considering the sheer number of adventurers who pass through here, it would be a disservice to them

all if I held them back any longer than necessary!" He huffs, his shoulders fall back before he straightens up again, one finger held high up into the air. "Worry not! It can be done!"

"I see. Thank you..." Perhaps, it is a silly thing to do—Sol is his own person at the end of the day—yet he finds himself turning toward Yohan for approval. "Would that be all right with you?"

Yohan merely waves Sol's worries away with a curt gesture of his hand. "Of course. We've still need to question the villagers, it gives us more than enough time to circle back here, before our departure." Yohan steps forth to place a hand against Sol's shoulder; the warmth of the knight's hand sinks past the robe, onto his skin. Sol cannot help but notice it. He pinches at the hem of the robe's sleeve in silence, his ears flush with a peach tint as Yohan smiles at him, warm and loving and full of heart. "Do not worry yourself, Sol."

The tailor raises a brow at them both. "Question?" he echoes. "Are you investigators?" As he speaks, he takes out his measuring tape from his pocket then strides up to Sol again. "Excuse me," he mumbles before he gets to work.

"Not quite," Yohan replies with his chin held high. "We are on a quest—a search for a herb, to make a remedy for a rather important client."

"*But.*" Sol adds, all the while he lifts his arm for the tailor to measure. "We aren't sure where to find it... *that's* been causing some headaches."

"Ah! I see!" The tailor raises a brow, before he pauses then hums. "And what sort of herb is it, then?"

Sol figures it wouldn't hurt to list the plant's many properties. He does so whilst the tailor moves on to his shoulders.

In the mirror's reflection, Sol notices the tailor glance his way again with a brow raised in curiosity, he worries the elderly man has suddenly figured out that he was not born in a body like Yohan's. *If his voice wasn't already a dead giveaway, surely measuring him was.* Sol regrets this already. He tries to keep his voice from faltering as he carries on with his explanation, but a burn of shame creeps up his neck. Sol wishes he could sink into the ground right then and there. Yet, everything is over before he ever has a chance.

The tailor walks away from him, back towards the boutique's counter. He names his price and Sol grimaces again, then hands his gold over awkwardly.

Before he and Yohan step out of the boutique once more, the tailor calls out to them. “Maybe this could help!”

He hands Sol a list, a few names and places where they may find something about the herb. “Thank you,” Sol tells the tailor with a modest nod, their eyes meet briefly, and he smiles at Sol.

“Worry not! The pleasure is mine!”

As noon rises and cracks the sun into orange, spilled egg yolk between clouds that watch over the village, Yohan and Sol set off to question the villagers.

The two of them stride through crowds atop stone pavements, Yohan whistles. “That wasn’t so bad, was it?”

“It was horrid.” Sol hunches over with a groan. “Especially that awkward look he gave me near the end... I felt so *judged*.”

“Sol.” Yohan rests a steady hand against Sol’s shoulder. “You don’t know what he was thinking.”

“B-But... he looked really perplexed when our eyes met.” Sol stares down to his boots. “And...”

“And?”

“And, it makes me feel like an inconvenience.”

“You deserve to exist. And take up space.” Yohan tilts his head until he gets a better look at Sol—then, he wraps his arm around Sol’s back, a crescent moon against the night sky. He pulls him in closer. “You’ve no need to make yourself smaller, for others to feel more at ease, Sol.” Yohan brushes the hair out of Sol’s face. “Does it matter, if he had thoughts? You do not need anyone’s permission.”

“I—” Sol parts his lips to reply, yet the sound of music makes him pause.

A light melody played on a piano filters through the air, from a cottage’s quaint little window. The sound drags Sol and Yohan’s attention towards the nameplate on the cottage’s letterbox.

“It’s one of the villagers the tailor talked about...” Sol mutters as he reads the name, ‘*Siegfried*’.

“Aren’t we lucky!” Yohan chuckles, as he strides towards the building. “I suppose, that solves our issue of looking for the next destination.”

* * *

After a good few hours of questioning the locals, Sol and Yohan finally take their leave with their singular tent in hand, as Sol dons his brand new robe.

“I doubt I’ll ever want to take this off!” Sol skips ahead of Yohan. “It feels so *great!*” He leaps across a dirt path with steps of joy; the robe is much less form-fitting than the ones he is used to wearing, it hides every part of his body that has never felt quite right, whilst giving it the hint of a shape he considers more masculine.

Upon receiving the robe, Sol quickly took notice of the ways it had been altered by the tailor—a few stitches to make it fall in ways that diminish the presence of his hips, added volume to his shoulders through the use of new pads, sewn into the garment itself—the improvements, though subtle, made all the difference. *To think the tailor had done all this in the span of a few mere hours*, Sol realized the moment he donned it again that the man likely was not judging him back then, *only thinking of how he could make the robe better fit the shape of his body, as it perfectly does now.*

Truly, he went above and beyond.

In his mind Sol had apologized to the elderly man many a time. As he’d thanked him within the walls of his boutique, he’d left the tailor with a hefty tip of an extra three gold pieces and the guilt of having misunderstood his nature.

Though Sol is certain that some day, he may indeed run into the odd disapproving glare, he decides against lingering on the thought—right now, he is grateful for all his blessings, that have led him into the hands of such good company.

Yohan laughs at Sol’s display of complete, unadulterated glee. “With the way things are going, you may not have to for a while!” he tells Sol, and he is not wrong, it seems they still have quite the journey ahead of them. Whether graduated or not, while on the road all mages are required to wear a robe to signal their status to others: both to avoid deserter warlocks tricking oblivious travelers with their forbidden crafts, or, so that passersby may know who to reach out to in times of magical emergencies.

Sol smiles as he ponders on the thought—*he is glad that, this time, he can wear this robe with only pride.*

“Sol, take a look!” Yohan points toward the base of the mountainside that has gotten closer in view with each step they’ve taken since their departure. “Seems we’ve arrived,” the knight mutters under his breath with a nod of determination, as he stares at their destination. “We should cook a filling meal, get an early rest before the sun sets, then climb before dawn rises.” Yohan glances at Sol from over his shoulder; the violet hues from the setting sun above reflect a lilac sheen against his armor, his eyes. “Do you feel up to it?”

Sol nods, he feels up to anything right now, he wonders if he could even fly. “Sounds good.”

They walk beside each other in silence for a little while longer. There are creatures lurking in the woodlands—Sol can hear them croaking, howling. And if he cares to look, pairs of yellow eyes, sometimes singular orbs, glow in the bushes. But they all seem to be wary—*afraid, of Yohan*. So, they stay away.

Soon, Yohan clears his throat. “That Siegfried fellow sure was helpful, wasn’t he?”

Sol nods whilst he thinks back to the man who claimed to be a butler of some sorts. “He seemed to know a lot.” *More than is normal for someone his age*. That man had a stench to him, not quite like Yohan’s but... it was ancient, unnerving, Sol isn’t quite sure what to make of it; it’s not like he could do anything about it now. “I’m glad he was able to inform us.”

Yohan smiles. He reaches for Sol’s hand, yet, he does not grab it. The knight merely grazes his fingers across Sol’s knuckles, softly, a reminder that they are still *here*, together. The tree leaves rustle against one another. Yohan’s voice is a whisper lost to the wind, as he turns then tells Sol, “Let’s set up camp, shall we?”

Sol decides he will raise their tent with much enthusiasm tonight, however his confidence soon falls from its graces, once Sol struggles to even get the stakes properly into the ground. Indeed, this is a much harder task than he’d anticipated, even after observing Yohan do it barehanded and flawlessly on multiple occasions.

Before Sol can call for aid, Yohan’s hand is on his again, angling the stake between Sol’s grip a tad to the left. “Like this,” Yohan whispers beside Sol’s ear. “It will go in easier, if you push it in from here.” Sol cannot help but notice the welcoming warmth of the knight’s skin pressed to his, as the ground finally gives beneath the stake that pierces the soil. “See?”

If Sol is being honest with himself, he was a tad too distracted to get all of that. “Your hands are nice,” he finds himself blurting. “I-I mean—it’s nice that your hands have shown me how to... well.” *What is he even saying?* “Um, I’m sorry.” Sol’s head hangs low as he sighs. “Would you mind showing me again?”

Yohan laughs, he caresses Sol’s hair. “You’ve no need for the apologies, Sol.” He leans forward, and presses a kiss to Sol’s forehead, and Sol can hear the smile in his voice. “Here. I’ll show you as many times as need be.”

Eventually, after a few awkward tries, Sol does get the hang of it. And by the time the moon’s pale eye observes them amid a canopy of stars, Yohan and Sol are feasting on a dinner of soup, bread and mutton from the local butcher, cooked just right over their campfire.

Sol is leaning against Yohan, shoulder to shoulder, when a thought crosses his mind. “You know, for a cursed knight, you don’t seem too inconvenienced.”

Yohan stares at him, deadpan, he looks behind Sol as if something has revealed itself in the wilderness. “I can sense when the living will die,” he mutters, the firelight casting dark shadows across his face. “That is why it is a curse.”

The crackling of flames fills the sudden silence between them.

“And, there are...other things,” the knight suddenly tells him as he clutches at the bowl between his grasp, he presses his lips together. “But, I would rather not dwell on them, if I can help it.”

Sol blinks. “O-Oh. Oh. Right. Of course.” *But sensing death...* he wonders, how that works. He did not expect such a blunt answer from the knight.

Yohan stares at Sol for a few more seconds, before he parts his lips again. “You look like you have questions.”

“I mean...” Sol scratches at his cheek. “Well, if it’s okay to ask... can you sense yours?”

“Unfortunately.”

The fleeting cries of crows fade then vanish. A moon moth flies into the woods. Yohan’s words from yesternight ring in Sol’s mind.

You’ve a long life ahead of you, after all.

“Yohan...” Sol brings a pondering fist to his own chin, there is a faint hope in his heart, that Yohan merely jested at that time. “When you mentioned my lifespan a few days ago, was that—”

“Do you truly want to know?” Yohan’s features are somber, stern as the flames that lick at the chilled cerulean in his eyes, leaving auburn strokes in their passing. Burnt blood across the sea.

“I...” *Shit*, Sol realizes. *He’s serious*. “It... depends.” He gulps.

Sure, Sol had always assumed he’d love to know when his life would end to better prepare for that moment, but... *what if it turns out to be tomorrow?*

Now that things are finally looking up, now that he is finally finding joy in the world, could he live with the idea of disappearing by sunset? “In either case,” Sol crosses his arms, he huffs, then leans his weight a tad more into Yohan. “That sounds... stressful,” a mumbled concern as he stares right into the fire’s heart. At the brittle wood being bent, crackling and halved in two split parts before they break into dozens of smaller, insignificant pieces. Ashes and dust.

Yohan nods slowly, before he forces a polite smile, an expression that seems rather practiced. Like he is on the verge of telling a lie. “I am—” The knight’s words catch in his throat, he averts his gaze, and his palm curls into a fist as his jaw tenses. “I cannot be anything but used to it.”

Used to it, what a dreadful choice of words. “Can I ask you something?”

“You’ve already been asking, dearest.” The knight chuckles again and the sincerity returns to his voice. “But, go ahead.” Yohan’s grin is warm, welcoming; even so, Sol can’t shake the feeling the knight hides more than he can imagine. “I’m listening.”

“How... does a Rider come to be, in the first place?” The practice is never stated in the legends. It is as if they come out of nowhere. As if they are pure magic.

A grim ghost of tension casts itself across Yohan’s features. The knight’s lips are pressed together in a thinning line. Sol raises a hand to place it on his lover’s shoulder—he is on the verge of telling Yohan that it doesn’t matter, he does not need to know; when Yohan parts his lips to speak again. “Fabricated,” he says. As he leans forward he clasps his own palms together. He stares into the fire. “When one Rider dies, it is imperative that the curse in their body be transferred to a new vessel.” Yohan brings an open palm to his chest. “In this case, that was me.”

“Why—” Sol stares up at Yohan, his chest tightens, concern gnaws at his heart. “Why does it sound as though you had no choice in the matter?”

“Because I didn’t.” Yohan spits the words like raw facts and not tragedy as he continues to gaze deep into the flames. “I was a poor orphan child, I could barely keep myself fed, let alone warm. The King wanted someone who would not be missed—and, Gods, did he get what he bargained for.” A pained smile takes Yohan’s lips, when he stares upward to the sky for the first time in the hour. “Sometimes, I wonder what life would have been like if they hadn’t chosen me, until I remember it is unlikely there would have been a life left to live.”

“S-Still...” Sol’s head hangs low. *What can he even say to that?* “You must have grieved being stripped of your ability to choose.”

Yohan nods, slow and steady. “At first, yes. However...there was no time to grieve. I was seven when they abducted me. They trained me to be one of their champions, they hoped I would become a perfect sword—they believed in me more than I believed in myself.” He laughs, yet the sound is hollow, full of old pain. “From where I hail, orphans rarely live past the age of five, I suppose the royal court thought that meant something about me was special, perhaps. They let me live a rather lavish life until my thirteenth birthday, and then...” Yohan’s fists tighten, until the once tan skin across his knuckles pales to pearl whites. He grits his teeth. “Then, I became a Rider, always busy out on the King’s rabid hunts. Always doing things, I... *did not like*. And now that I am older, now that I survived”—Yohan’s shoulders drop alongside the deep exhale he lets out, from hearing him alone, one would think he has not breathed in years—“finally, I am allowed to retire.” Yohan turns to Sol, a weak smile takes his trembling lips. “*Finally...*they are letting me leave.”

An owl hoots into the distance.

Sol has to force himself to pause. “I...” His blood boils with rage. “I don’t know what to say.” *Bastard King*, he thinks, though he would never dare say it aloud. *Bastard. Gods-damned. King*. “Do you not despise them in the slightest?”

“That is...” Yohan sighs as he pinches the bridge of his nose. “A complicated question. As much as I wish I could’ve had a choice—*every man does*—freedom is a luxury sometimes. And in that moment, it was not mine.” He glances upward, until his eyes meet with Sol’s. Yohan reaches for his hand, he squeezes it, once. “Trust me when I say, I have reflected on the matter for years... had I been given the choice, I’m sure I would have agreed, in the end. Because there was nothing else I could do.”

Without giving it second thought, Sol leans in. He wraps his arms around the knight's shoulders and embraces him deeply. "But it's so unfair," he whispers into the crook of Yohan's neck. Sol has never cried for another before tonight—and yet here he is, unable to help himself, his tears falling as freely as yesternight's rain.

Yohan doesn't reply with words. Instead, he nestles his head against the thick wool cape draped across Sol's shoulders, then rests his palm against the curve of Sol's spine. He cups Sol's jaw with a tender motion and kisses him, soft, loving and slow. His fingers are threaded through the back of Sol's hair. And in the mid of night the crickets sing, the flames crackle then rise, until it is only darkness once again.

* * *

If it wasn't already, it has now become *very* apparent to Sol just how much Yohan is used to these sort of outings, while Sol... isn't. "*How* do you do this *constantly*?" Sol pants and heaves and wallows in the misery of the climb as he observes the knight, who is twice his size, scale up the mountain as if he were lighter than a bird.

Yohan offers his hand to Sol. "Here," he shows Sol a reassuring smile. "Let me be your aid, sweetest."

Sol flutters his eyelashes at the nickname as he looks to his left—out at the scenery, the trees risen across the mountainside rocks. They remind Sol of the moss he would sometimes find stuck under his windowsill, back in the dangerous comfort of his small hometown. If Sol squints then stares out into the distance, past the strange forest, he can barely make out the silhouette of the village they left behind yesterday.

He takes Yohan's hand.

The trek upward is a merciless foe, and Sol wonders how he's going to get back down by sunfall—*when he can barely stand to keep going*—once he arrives at their destination: the mountain's halfway point.

“You all right?” Yohan pushes the question out between two pants as he stretches his arms—for once he, too, is out of breath. *This* surprises Sol.

So he tires, after all, Sol thinks to himself whilst he heaves in the clear mountainside air, the only thing keeping him going at this point. “I’m fine...” Or so he says but, *Gods*, does Sol feel out of breath. He rests both his hands against his knees, then takes a careless swig from his waterskin, spilling a few drops that trickle down his lips. Yohan takes the liberty of stepping toward Sol as he reaches for him, he wipes the water off Sol’s chin.

The knight’s palm lingers against Sol’s jaw for a moment. His brows are knitted together in the ways they tend to be, whenever Yohan loses himself to a thought. “Why don’t we take a short break?”

“If we do that”—Sol pants—“then we won’t make it back by sunfall.”

“Ah, and you are so certain of that?” For reasons Sol ignores, Yohan sounds rather amused.

The knight hums, and raises his arms beside him in the air. With a click of his fingers, Yohan has summoned three dark, translucent eggs. A black fog rises then swirls around them, until the eggs hatch into strange shadows carved in the shape of fiends.

Sol has never seen anything like this before: they are unlike all the summons he has dealt with and learned of through and through his studies. *Only, they carry the same reek of sulfur that gave Yohan away as a Rider back in Featherlaine, and so does that fog.*

The fiends seem to linger by the knight’s feet, giving the illusion of floating as they await Yohan’s next command. Yohan motions for them to listen, *obey*. “I need you to find a plant for me,” the knight says, whilst he provides them with a description of the herb in question. “Return before the hour ends. *Don’t* waste my time.”

The way Yohan speaks to these creatures catches Sol off guard. As the impish creatures hop away like strange children who have just been scolded by a parent, Sol cannot help but raise a brow at Yohan’s stern display. “That’s an... interesting way of talking to another living being,” Sol says before his rear finds the ground once more, he sits to gather his bearings. He stares up at Yohan. “I’ve never seen this side of you before.” *Is your kindness a mere facade for something uglier that lies*

within you? The words are left unspoken, but Sol is certain Yohan hears the hint of distrust that mingles with Sol's own tone.

And then it is that old fear which settles in his gut, returning as it makes him nauseous and weak in the arms—Yohan might not be the man Sol believes him to be. A monster that dwells preying upon men.

A monster wearing the face of a lover.

A monster.

A monster.

A monster—

"I have to, unfortunately."

Sol blinks. "What?"

"I have to," Yohan echoes as he brings a fist to his lips, he lets himself drop to the floor, beside Sol. The knight rests his elbows against his knees; his silver armor clinks then glimmers like oceanshine under the afternoon light. "If I am not careful, they could devour me whole. And then, we would have a significant problem on our hands. I must show them no emotion nor fear—men who are anything but cold before beasts of their kind have their memories stolen, their feelings channeled and used against them, 'til they turn mad."

Sol rises on instinct from where he'd laid, his eyes widening, as he pictures the gnarly scene. "Gods, Yohan, why do something so dangerous when we could have just looked for—"

"Ah." Yohan tilts his head and stares at Sol blanky. "You've no need to worry: they are only capable of attacking those who summon them. You are not at risk."

"That's not what I meant!" Sol shakes his head. "What about..." A cringe takes his features, before he glances to Yohan again, concern swimming in his blood, his gaze. "What about you?"

"Me?" Yohan scoffs. "Who cares about me?" He motions to the fiends up ahead, who are scavenging through the bushes, searching for the plant. "I have dealt with them more times than I can count. I will be well."

Sol is silent, frozen at the words for a moment, until he sits back down again. He leans his weight towards Yohan, then rests his head against the knight's chest. "I care about you..." he mumbles, his lips pouted into a frown as he stares at the ground.

Yohan does not reply, and Sol doesn't blame him. He supposes acknowledging the statement may cause him to show emotion, *to feel*.

The two sit in silence, side by side, shoulder to shoulder. Sol thinks about life—more specifically, *Yohan's* life. It was rather easy to forget Yohan truly is one of the Old Kings Cursed Riders when they were merely traveling together. Yohan had no need to rely on what Riders were most feared for: their prowess in taboo magical arts. *Wielders of the darkest nights*.

To think, Yohan was not hardened by such a life, and still manages to remain gentle and kind despite the monstrosities, the horrors he must have endured as a man forced into this difficult role... Sol isn't quite sure he would have it in himself to love anything again, after being put through such trials. He admires Yohan, yet fears him all the same: the knight is an enigma. *How can he simply shrug this all off and retire?*

How could he not want to see the world burn?

Sol was wrong—Yohan is the opposite of a monster, he is more human than anyone ever could be.

The two of them watch the shadows, the fiends working, without exchanging another word—until the hour passes, and the creatures return. They've plucked more than is necessary from the ground. Yohan soon dismisses them with another snap of his fingers. The fiends disappear, fading into thin air, faster than they had arrived. The herbs and plants they'd swiped fall to the ground with a featherlike sway, as if an invisible force delivers them slowly, across the light breeze.

Sol rushes toward the herbs, he quickly gathers them inside his bag before the wind can have its way with his ingredients. Once finished, Sol huffs and wipes the sweat away from his brow with the back of his arm. "I think that's all of them," he says, when Yohan wraps his arm around his waist, then pulls him in close for a hug.

"Sol," Yohan murmurs the word into Sol's hair. "Could you promise me that you will be silent—still?"

"W-Why?"

Yohan points to the sky. "It's getting dark, the sun will be down soon. Making our descent by foot would be dangerous."

Sol stares at the knight and a frown takes his lips. “How do you suggest we get down?”

“Not by foot.” Yohan raises his arm in the air as he readies himself to snap his fingers again. “Promise me, Sol, that you will not make me feel. The curse waits for such moments, to sink its teeth in me.”

“Yohan,” Sol steps forth. “Stop. You’re playing with fire, you shouldn’t be—”

“I know.” Yohan traps his lower lip between his teeth as his gaze meets the dirt by their feet. “I know all too well. But, this will be the last time. Afterwards... I hope to never have to depend on them again.” And then, as Yohan’s fingers hit one another, he summons another beast out of an invisible abyss. The clicking of hooves hit the mountain floor. A Shire made of the darkest shadows materializes before them, its bright eyes glow a deep yellow shade and flicker as if made of dying candlelight. It stares straight at Sol. Sol feels see-through beneath its gaze, it is like looking *la mort* in the eye. *Perhaps, it is death itself.*

From the shire’s body, a black fog emerges and licks the air.

“Come,” Yohan jumps onto the horse’s back, he holds out his hand for Sol to take, “unless you want to stay out here and freeze.”

Sol gulps. He can find no argument against that. He grabs hold of Yohan’s hand—and they ride. Past the forest and the rocks, down the perilous mountainside. Sol holds on tightly to Yohan’s waist, the two of them are carried downhill like a slither of mist.

Sol had only heard of mounts formed from Oblivion’s depths in old tales, legends he would hear as bedtime stories. *To think Yohan has summoned one with such ease, right before his eyes... what a peculiar journey this all has been.*

In so little time, Sol feels as though he has touched the world and the world has touched his heart.

They meet the ground again soon. When Yohan snaps his fingers again, out fades that glorious mount, it leaves a trail of glittering darkness in its wake before the void claims it once more. “Wow,” Sol breathes, awestruck at the sight of specks of magic from the crepuscule that float across the air around them. He turns to face Yohan. “Yohan, that was—”

Amazing—the word lingers on Sol’s tongue, yet it does not make it past his lips, for Sol freezes upon seeing Yohan on his knees. Yohan panting, as if he’d

walked for miles. Yohan keeling over, his fist grabbing at the dirt ground. “Yohan! What’s wrong?”

Yohan’s back rises then falls as he takes a deep breath in, out. He tilts his chin upward to face Sol once more. Terror shrouds the usual brightest sky that inhabits his gaze. “I—” Yohan’s eyes widen. “I almost lost control,” he speaks the words like a sin confessed, “when you held onto me, I...” The knight’s voice breaks then trembles under the weight of his gnawing panic. “I felt it eat at my heart. Its claws were inside me. It latched onto my—” Yohan takes another deep breath. He falls silent as his gaze meets the ground once more. “Onto my...”

“Your what?” Sol doesn’t mean to raise his voice, but his thoughts are faster than his logic, every emotion he feels spills out of him like blood from a bad gash.

“Onto me.” Yohan’s breaths are heavy. He dares not face Sol. “It latched onto me. It had me, for a moment, it—”

“Yohan.” Sol steps forth with the intention of placing a hand against the knight’s shoulder, yet his palm hovers above silver, he hesitates. “But isn’t it fine, now?” His lower lip quivers. “You’re here. You’re still here.” *Right?*

“I...” Yohan shakes his head and shuts his eyes. “I didn’t ever think there would come a time where I would be unable to control them. It is... so unlike me.” It isn’t hard to hear the loss in Yohan’s voice. “But, it seems I cannot call upon them again.”

“Must you?”

A light drizzle falls upon the land.

Yohan falls back onto his thighs. He is covered in dirt as he kneels before Sol, with his fists rested atop his own legs, he gazes upward—to Sol. “If we face any greater threats on our way to the palace,” Yohan opens his palm then glances at it with a blank, hollow stare. “I won’t be able to rely on the curse’s ancient power.” He shuts his eyes, and anguish sews his brow into a tight line. “What good is a Rider who cannot protect? What good is a weapon that cannot cut a man down? What good am I now, then?”

“Yohan,” Sol whispers again, softer and this time, he places his hand atop Yohan’s shoulder. The mud and the grit from the knight’s armor are cold against his skin. “You are strong. So much stronger than you believe yourself to be. You climbed that mountain like it was no challenge even while aiding me, and

carrying both our belongings, you don't... That power, *that curse*, you don't need to rely on it." He smiles, his lips are upturned in a bittersweet manner. "It is clear you've outgrown it. You are not the helpless orphan boy they picked up all those years ago, not anymore." Sol shakes his head. "You are a good man—and that, I believe, is better than any good Rider could be."

Yohan places a hand over Sol's knuckles; Sol feels him squeeze, before the knight takes his palms and presses his lips atop Sol's fingers in a soft, comforting kiss. "Sol, have you ever wished for something so much so, that you find yourself fearing it once you find it?"

I have, Sol wants to say. *It's happening right now*. "Is that what this is?"

Yohan's eyes widen at the words, but he wallows in his silence, shame spread across his features.

"Is that why you think you are not worthy?"

"Did you not find it odd, Sol," Yohan finally mutters, "that I was so old?"

Sol raises a brow at him then cringes. "You are *not* that old! You are not even forty yet."

"For a Rider, I meant."

"Oh..." Now, it is Sol who falls quiet. It is true that Sol had heard many a tale of Riders dying young—in fact, those very stories were used to scare him as a child, to ward him off from wandering into the streets late at night. *Should the Old King's curse catch you, you will no longer be yourself—by the time you are old enough to see the snowfall with your first love, a creature born from the night will have taken your place, your soul.*

The words echo amid the silence, a scar of the past that fills Sol's mind. When Sol looks to Yohan again, he wonders if he is staring at a ghost. For Yohan is right, he should be long gone.

"I'm not a demon, if that's what you're wondering," Yohan huffs.

"Oh. Um." Sol can feel the heat rising to his face. "Sorry."

Yohan rises to his feet. And his cape flows in the gentle spring winds. He stares down at Sol. "I am here because of the way I have lived life up until today," he tells Sol. "When I understood feeling love, sadness, pain—*any* sort of emotion, would mean being devoured by those wretched creatures, I isolated myself on purpose. I never wanted to be needlessly distracted." He brings a hand over his heart as he continues to gaze at Sol. Yohan chuckles. "But now, look at

me... Feeling again. It is so difficult to keep it all in after holding back for all these years, Sol, as much as it would have served me to be a cold, cunning man, I am only a pretender when it comes to this sort of heartlessness. I am only..."

Human. I am only human, although Yohan leaves the words unsaid, Sol can hear them, lingering in the space between them. "It's okay." Sol runs his hand down the mid of Yohan's chest and pauses. He never thought he'd be saying this, until recently, when Yohan showed him there were other, brighter ways to live his life. "It's okay to feel."

Sol's eyes are lidded, his shoulders draped in grief as he considers his next words. "You don't have to keep doing this." Sol smiles at the odd, beautiful havoc that has emerged from this situation. "You'll be a free man soon, Yohan. In fact, in some ways"—he blinks and looks to the knight—"wouldn't you say you already are?"

"Perhaps."

Yohan steps away from Sol, and Sol stares at his lover's back as he makes for their next destination: a tunnel of trees, a bridge, the entrance to his Kingdom at last. "If I can be honest," Yohan mutters, his hand pressed to the hilt of his sword. "I do not feel free. And I fear I will only truly be, once I feel it in my heart. Which is not now." He marches forth—thick, dark mud sticks to the soles of his silver boots, as the rain hits the land with a heavier might.

Yohan lets out a broken chuckle. "As long as I remain a prisoner in my mind, what good will freedom do me?" he asks Sol.

And Sol wishes he had the words to tell him it would be okay.

But he has a feeling Yohan would not believe him. So, he stays silent and follows him, quiet worry murmuring sorrow into his heart.

* * *

"Are you awake?"

It is dark and by now, the crickets have long stopped singing. But Sol cannot find sleep. Earlier in the evening he watched the sun set purple bruises in the sky alone, while Yohan retired early for their tent—yet now here he is, tugging on

Yohan's sleeve. As Sol tries to summon a quarter of the bravery Yohan holds, he tells the knight, "I want to know."

And Yohan turns around. Their eyes meet. *He's awake*, Sol realizes. *Has been awake all this time*. "I want to know about my death," Sol knows it is a silly thing to say after everything that happened today, but the silence is unbearable, and talking about intolerable subjects would make it at least a little better because then there would be sound, something to ground them in their existence. Yohan's voice.

Yohan's words.

"Do you, now?" Yohan's tone sounds lower than usual, there is something bare and raw about it, as the knight reaches out to caress Sol's cheek.

Sol's heart beats in the crux of his throat. He swallows, hard. "Yeah."

The moon's gentle light shines through the tent's roof, permeating soft tissue like the sun does to skin, it illuminates their faces in the melt of a pale milk glow. "You are aware," Yohan tells him, "that there will be no taking this back—once you know." Despite his warning, a strange joy coats the knight's features, as if *wants* to share this secret with Sol.

"You want to say it," *so desperately, you do*, Sol thinks whilst he whispers the words before he can think. "Why?"

Yohan thumbs at Sol's face. His brows arch upward in a sincere gesture, he takes a deep breath in. And then, exhales, shaken. Unlike today, when he did all he could to appear unaffected—he is letting Sol in. "Yours..." Yohan shuts his eyes. "Is close—"

"Close!" Sol finds himself shouting the word. "*Close?*" Worry jumps at his heart until—

Yohan brings his hand up, between them, and shakes his hand a tad. The knight's face is flushed, regretful. "Close to *mine*." He coughs into his fist, then clears his throat. "I'm sorry. You didn't let me finish. I'm sorry if that frightened you."

"Oh." Sol feels like an idiot, but he breathes a tad easier now, knowing that... *well, he doesn't know anything at all really now, does he?* He pauses, blinks, the vague thought of dying as Solange and not Sol tugs at his heart. "Um." Sol's voice rises in pitch, awkwardly, this is not going as he had planned for it to go. "H-How close?"

Yohan's head disappears into his shoulders. He looks away. "It is...exactly the same as mine," Once he speaks the words, Yohan immediately freezes against Sol.

"What?" Sol eyes widen. "How could that be?" The weight of Yohan's hand suddenly feels heavier atop his skin.

"Who knows." Nothing but earnest helplessness settles in Yohan's grin—Sol realizes, the man is not lying. "This has never happened before." Yohan squeezes at Sol's hand. "And I doubt it will happen again."

"Is..." Sol mumbles, before he stops himself. He bites his lip, and he prays that this does not signify they will die together on this trip. "Is it soon?"

"No," Yohan shakes his head, "not at all. I did not jest, when I said you had a long life ahead of you. Only"—he laughs—"for some reason, it seems our fates are intertwined."

The revelation is an odd one, indeed. Though, Sol does find comfort in the fact that he will have enough time to grow into himself. To grow old. It was hard to picture sometimes; inside his chest, his heart weighs a little lighter.

Neither of them say another word, and a short moment passes, until Yohan sighs again. "I am sorry," he starts, "I hadn't been completely honest with you. But now that you know everything, now that you know the truth: part of why I felt so fond of you was because of this—this *inexplicable* link we seem to share. You intrigued me, greatly... however, if you were to feel betrayed by this revelation in any kind of way, I would understand and I would not..."

As he listens to the knight's confession, it occurs to Sol that neither he nor Yohan have been entirely truthful until now. And in some ways, he is relieved. *Sol pursued Yohan because of those visions. And Yohan... because of his lifespan.*

If anything, this seems quite fair.

"I'm... somewhat of a seer myself," Sol blurts, and he does not know why he phrases it that way, when all he did was hallucinate while medicated.

"You—" Yohan stares at him, in the blank way that the rabbits would in Sol's childhood backyard, when they'd straighten up after hearing an odd sound late into the night. "You are?" The knight pauses, then smirks. "Oh. Did you foresee this?"

Sol giggles, then reaches for the knight's hand. "There will be no taking this back—once you know," he echoes, words that had once resided in Yohan's lips, when they were still strangers to each other's secrets.

Yohan leans, inward, he presses a chaste kiss to Sol's mouth and smiles in his handsome, gallant way that drives Sol mad. "I would not want to take back knowing you, dearest."

Sol's lip jerks downward and tears blur his eyes. "Y-Yohan." He whimpers as he wraps his arms around Yohan's shoulders, he holds the knight closer. It has been so long. *So long since he had wished and prayed for this moment to arrive.*

Sol tells him everything: from the first vision where Yohan was but a mere silhouette, even though his voice was clear as the sound of water flowing down a stream. To the vividness of his image that revealed itself to Sol, slowly throughout the years, until Sol could bask in him fully like he does tonight.

Before long, Yohan is laughing and kissing him, leaving little gentle touches up across Sol's spine, down his arms. Sol sighs against his lips.

He remembers his fear of what will happen after—of the world that awaits them both beyond the visions—but Sol is pulled into Yohan's orbit like stars follow the moon. He wants to disappear inside him, to create something new out of every piece of themselves they both grieved tonight, until they are a constellation, two tangled bodies who refuse to yield to this always trying world; which time and again tries to bend them at its will. *Being together like this, is an act of resistance.*

A symbol of freedom.

Rebirth.

"Yohan. Yohan," Sol pants, as the two of them shift, tumbling, lost to the kisses they share—Sol finds himself straddling Yohan's waist, he feels the knight's erection pressed to his cunt, and lets himself melt into him. *He has waited for this day, for years; to finally feel him like this, to know Yohan isn't a dream that will evaporate from existence, once he wakes...*

Sol doesn't want to pull away.

And, judging from the desperate look of wanting Yohan is giving him, neither does his lover.

"Sol." Yohan cradles the back of Sol's head in his palm. His breaths fall hot, onto Sol's lips, before they kiss again. *Again.* And Sol moans into the knight's mouth, never has he heard himself make a sound so filled with the appetite of lust; then again, his head has never spun like so, from being kissed alone. Yohan

has engulfed his senses in velvet warmth. And Sol hungers to yield. *To the feel of Yohan. On top of him. Touching him. Loving him.*

"Touch me," Sol whispers. "Yohan." He shuts his eyes. "Touch me. *Please.*"

There is a silence, Sol's deep exhale after his plea, answered by the feel of Yohan's large, warm palm that slides down his back and comes to rest atop his waist.

Yohan is in no rush, and Sol likes that. He likes that Yohan waits, just a moment, before slipping his fingers up Sol's robe. He likes it, when Yohan rubs gentle, slow circles into his bare skin. Being touched by him is as exhilarating as it is a comfort. Sol's heart races—for once, not with fear, but anticipation—and he wonders if this is what safety is meant to be.

If this, is love.

Sol *wants* to sink, deeper into him—to drink and to be drunk on all the pleasures his knight has to offer. Yet, as he relaxes, so does his mind tangle into a wild, unpredictable thing. One minute, Sol is tugging at Yohan's shirt, urging the knight to slip his tongue into his mouth.

The next, Sol is frozen—filled by a dread that makes his legs as heavy as stone. "Sol?" Yohan's voice is tender enough to serve as reassurance, the deep rumble of his words reminds Sol how to breathe again.

But he is trembling now. His blood cooled with a venom of scorn for his own self. *I was doing so well*, Sol thinks. *And yet! And yet—*

"My love, breathe," Yohan threads his fingers through Sol's hair—he cradles him closer, his lips meeting with Sol's forehead. It's warm. "You're safe."

It's warm, and Sol blinks.

Yohan's so warm.

"Yohan," Sol whispers, as he clings to the fabric of the knight's shirt that falls over the broadness of his chest. "I-I— I want to do it with you, I want to be closer to you. But I..." He buries his face into the crook of Yohan's shoulder, his voice soft, when he mumbles the words, "I don't know how."

Yohan embraces him 'til no space remains between them. His strong, muscular arms are a safety net to Sol's fears. Yohan kisses Sol, from his eyelids to the tip of his fingers, he washes away the tension that had lived in Sol's body with the sweet brush of his lips. "We will figure it out." The knight presses his

mouth softly to the corner of Sol's lips. He gives Sol's hand a caring, tender squeeze. "Together, I promise you."

And Sol is so full of joy he fears he may cry, *in fact, he does*. "Yohan." Sol rests his head against the knight's deft shoulders. "I like this." He runs his mouth across Yohan's neck, then breathes words so soft and silent, that he wonders if Yohan will even hear. "I like you."

Yet, when Yohan's lips find his cheek, the knight smiles. "I like you, too, sweetest." He thumbs at Sol's jaw, and Sol cannot resist leaning in to kiss his lover.

"I have an idea," Yohan says, before he leans in, to utter sweet ideas in Sol's ear. And at his knight's suggestions, Sol's face reddens. *Yet, he finds, that he quite wants to try.*

"I'd..." Sol bites into his lower lip as he nods. "That sounds... pleasant, actually." He surprises himself by saying the words, but it is true.

Yohan leaves one final little peck against Sol's forehead. "Tell me if you ever want to stop, my heart," he hugs Sol tightly, "we won't do anything you don't want to, I promise." The words warm Sol's chest as Yohan urges him onto his back, two hands deftly pressed to Sol's waist. Yohan moves slowly, steadily until he is between Sol's knees, undressing Sol from the waist down; he slips Sol's undergarments down his legs.

Sol looks to him, expectant, a tad over-excited yet nervous. His heart is beating loudly in his throat like footsteps nearing toward a door Sol prays Yohan will open. "May I?" The knight's eyes meet Sol's anew. He is waiting, patient, as Sol's thighs tremble beside his head.

Sol gulps, he takes a small moment to recollect his bearings; eventually, he nods and Yohan reaches for his hands. He threads their fingers together.

Yohan dips his head downward, until his breaths ghost against Sol's sweetest warmth and Sol shivers, he bites into his lip again to try and keep his voice down, yet a whimper escapes him anyway. *And, Gods, does it feel good.* His mind is flooded with memories of the visions—*how many years had he longed for this? Being close to Yohan, being touched by Yohan, being here in this man's strong, loving arms.*

"Relax, my handsome man," Yohan whispers as he stares at Sol through lidded eyes, he leans forward to *kiss*, all across Sol's warmth. And Sol does not

expect this—the gentleness, the way the knight takes his time, it is different from his dreams. It is so much more. “Want me to suck your cock, sweetest?” Yohan asks, and Sol’s eyes roll to the back of his head.

“Please,” Sol gasps before Yohan’s mouth is on him fully. “Gods.” Sol chokes on a moan, he squeezes Yohan’s hands. His breaths quicken then hitch, when Yohan enters him with his tongue. “*Gods.*”

The feel of him is hot and mellow, and Sol’s his back arches, he unravels into the knight’s touch. “I-I’m—” Sol tenses. “I’m gonna—” He holds his breath. *What if something goes wrong? What if he can’t climax properly?*

What if—

Perhaps, Yohan notices the way Sol’s brows arch up in worry, for the knight hushes him. “Sol,” he whispers. “It is all right. Let it consume you—I have you.”

“O-Oh—” Sol blinks away his tears of pleasure that slip down his cheeks as he stares down to Yohan, he hadn’t realized how taut his body had been until Yohan’s soft, encouraging words help him breathe again. And they are all he needs, before he is shutting his eyes again, coming with Yohan’s tongue pushed, deep inside him—and the fleeting thought that the knight can feel *everything* briefly flitters through him; but that self-conscious worry is soon replaced by a numb, celestial heat when Sol whimpers Yohan’s name, over again like an odd prayer. “Yohan. *Yohan.*”

Yohan, Sol’s mind is full of him, tears line his eyes anew; ones that Yohan soon wipes away as he brings Sol in for a cuddle against his chest, whilst Sol catches his breaths. “That was...”

“Pleasant?”

Sol flutters his eyelids upon hearing the word, he laughs. “More than pleasant.” Sol presses a kiss to the knight’s jawline. “It was the first time I’d...” Sol pauses, “*felt* that in years.”

A brief, pained expression flashes across the knight’s face before it disappears, as quick as it had arrived.

“Say,” Sol mutters again through a groan. He shuts his eyes. He rests an open palm atop Yohan’s heart and concentrates on the knight’s pulse. Yohan’s erection presses into the curve of his pubis. “Should I take care of it for you?”

There is a pause and then, Yohan kisses the crown of Sol’s head yet again. “Do you want to?”

Sol does. Truly, there is nothing he wants more. *But...*

Tonight has been quite a lot.

He tenses against Yohan as he wonders what he should do, what he should say, but Yohan speaks up before Sol even has a chance to articulate an answer.

“We don’t have to do everything today, my heart.” Yohan glances down at Sol with a caring look of kindness, a smile. “It is okay to take your time, we’ve more than enough years, after all.” The knight’s face pales as he speaks the words, as if he has said something wrong. Yohan tenses.

He clears his throat then adds, “If...that is what you want, of course.”

And... *Oh*, Sol realizes.

That is what this is about.

Sol takes Yohan's hand, he brings the knight's fingers to his mouth. "Yohan, being with you brings me much joy and glee—I'd like to see where this goes, too." He shows Yohan an earnest grin. And the two hug again.

And they kiss again for hours that night, before finally falling asleep, under the rain.

* * *

Sol loves the fresh, mountainside air. However, what he does not appreciate, is what the mountains have done to his now-aching back. He crouches over and kneels amid their temporary campsite, as he picks at the ground. "When I get home, I'm going to take the longest bath..." Sol is already fantasizing about the concoctions he so often creates with the potion shop's leftovers—one of them that he invented early in his time as Androles' apprentice, is a potion that warms water and gives it a nice rose scent, and Sol simply cannot wait to get a hold of it again—but before that, his mind wanders briefly to last night.

To Yohan. And how the knight touched him.

Sol isn't sure what he is doing, here, messing around with this man he has—in theory—only just met.

This journey is like a strange cocoon, and Sol feels as though he is growing his wings.

He pauses to ponder on the thought, when the odd sound of uncoordinated clank, and clinks of cooking pans catches his attention. Sol turns his head to his left, a little further into their camp, where Yohan is neatly packing away all their leftover food from this morning and taking down his cooking pot. The way he moves is meticulous. Sol wonders how often he has had to do this in the past. "You know," Sol observes him from afar. "Your attention to detail is impeccable."

"It has to be," Yohan tells him with a casual hum as he wraps the bread they'd used for breakfast back inside a clean cloth, before popping it into his satchel. "Else I doubt I'd be very good at fulfilling my duties nor my dream once I retire."

Sol falls silent; the world seems to speak to him louder than usual, as the rural sounds from the forest and fauna all around permeate his ears. "Dream?"

He blinks, and then tilts his head sideways. "What dream?"

"I did not tell you?" Yohan shuts his bag again. He rises to his feet with a contented huff and stares at his handiwork, a satisfied grin taking his features before he looks back to Sol once more. "I'm opening a tea house."

The wind carries a leaf which flies between them, as Yohan's declaration settles in the air.

"Really?" Sol steps forth, his fist is pressed close to his own heart, and he holds it there in wait of Yohan's reply. "Where?"

"I was considering Featherlaine, actually."

Well, that does make sense, Sol supposes. "But, why a tea house, out of all things?"

Yohan hooks an arm around the back of his own neck, an awkward snicker escapes him. "During my first year as a Rider, the palace walls never truly felt like home. But," the knight smiles again, as if recalling a fond memory, "whenever I'd travel to isolated villages or towns, and stumble upon a teahouse there—it was always a comforting sight." Yohan rests his palms against his hips, he huffs. "It would not be an exaggeration to say I made my most fond memories there... bringing that kind of comfort to even one weary traveler seems like a nice way to live out the rest of my life. Not to mention"—he rests a fist to his lips then clears his throat once more—"I *think* I could very well use the sense of normalcy it could bring me: no strange creatures to summon, no cursed lands to roam, no *life or death* missions, only... little cakes to arrange in the morning, flowers to water before your shop opens, and herbs to crush on the daily." Yohan sighs like he is lost to a pleasant dream. "How I long for those simple days."

"I'm not sure if it's *that* simple," Sol mutters whilst he strides up to Yohan. "Running a shop's a lot of work, you know." He stares up at the knight. "But if anyone can do it—I'm sure it'll be you, Yohan." As he watches the knight's cheeks flush deep carmine at the compliment, Sol leans in to wrap his arms around the knight's waist then holds him there, for a moment. "And, I agree." Sol's lips break into a smile. "Our town definitely needs a place like that."

"Would—" It is sudden, yet Yohan sounds a tad choked up. "Would you..."

Sol pulls away to glance up at his knight "Would I?" he asks with his hands posed across the crook of Yohan's elbows; it is then that Sol notices the beet red

flush in Yohan's face has darkened, and Sol chuckles with a raised, playful brow. "Would I what, lover?"

"Would you be my first customer?"

At the knight's blurted question Sol cannot help but frown, before the light, soft sound of his laughter is carried by the wind across blooming spring fields. "Yohan," Sol wipes a tear of joy away from his eyelid. "You truly needn't ask." As he stands on the tips of his toes then slips his arms around Yohan's shoulders this time, Sol giggles again, beside the knight's ear. He presses a chaste kiss to the knight's cheek. "But I would be happy to, beloved." Then, Sol pauses. He blinks—whispers, "You're hard again, Yohan."

The sigh Yohan lets out is long, desperate and slow. "I know," the knight's voice is hushed, tangled with the smother of morning lust.

Sol finds himself longing to touch him now. "Yohan," Sol rests his head against Yohan's heart; it is beating so loudly. "Can I?" he asks in a mumbled tone, his lips pressed to the knight's chest.

Yohan peers around at their environs; the clothes they'd hung up to dry at dawn, that are all still slightly damp; the half-packed campsite whose air is tinged with the faint burning of ashes from this morning's firewood; every little sign of a life that has been lived between them. Yohan hums, before he leans down to embrace Sol—and Sol thinks he will never get enough of this semblance of safety that being in the knight's arms brings him.

"I suppose, we have time."

Yohan threads their fingers together. He leads Sol by the hand, towards the abandoned barn they had slept in last night. Beneath their feet a twig crackles in two. Sol follows him in; the scent of dry hay that fills the air anew has always been an odd respite to him.

As Yohan takes a seat on a square hay bale, Sol kneels by the knight's boots.

"Oh. Sol." Yohan brings a hand to Sol's cheek. "You do not have to—"

"I want to." Sol meets the knight's gaze again; there is a fire in his eyes. "Can I?" he asks Yohan.

Yohan's face sinks deeper into his own hand. "I might not last very long if you were to..." he grumbles, "do that. But—" Yohan reaches for the belt strung around his pants, he unbuckles sterling silver that is soon undone with a brief

clank. “You may,” he tells Sol with his face red, his hair disheveled as it falls to cover his eyes.

Yohan takes his cock out of his pants, right before Sol’s face. And Sol watches, he thinks, *Ah, so that is what it looks like*. Of course, he had seen medical diagrams in the past, and the visions gave him somewhat of an idea, *still...* “You look... very handsome, Yohan,” he blurts without giving it second thought.

“Th-Thank you—” Yohan hisses whilst he squeezes at the base of his erection, he leans back with another sigh, his eyes flutter shut.

At the sight of Yohan letting go of himself, leaning backwards with his shoulders now pressed to the wall in a vulnerable show, Sol feels himself soak through his breeches. He didn’t expect the knight’s manhood to find him squirming and pressing his thighs together like this. But it is exciting, and fun, and Sol cannot help the smile that tugs at his lips that he licks with deep anticipation. At first, Sol reaches for Yohan with a hesitant, gentle grip.

But when he starts to move, Yohan’s breaths grow heavy as he pants, Sol rubs his fingers across the tip of his slick wet cock. The knight throws his head back—he thrusts, on instinct, into Sol’s hand.

Sol feels Yohan’s pulse race across the vein that travels up the girth of his cock. He continues to rub him between his hands, gratified by every reaction, every moan and twinge of the lip this gets out of Yohan. The flush in Yohan’s face, the way his hair falls in a perfect mess across his forehead will forever be etched into Sol’s memory. “You’re so handsome, Yohan,” he whispers, sweet arousal tugging his mouth back into a grin again as he continues to touch Yohan with a soft, attentive caress.

Yohan reaches for Sol’s face—he runs his fingers through Sol’s hair. “You are, too,” he tells Sol with a languid smile as he looks to Sol, his eyes lidded by arousal. “Such a handsome man—*ah*.”

A meagre, awkward laugh leaves Sol’s lips. *If he is honest with himself, even when Yohan compliments him in such ways, it feels hard to believe*. “You keep saying that.” Sol lowers his gaze. “You know, you don’t have to lie.”

“Lie?”

“I know that I don’t...” Sol traps his lower lip between his teeth. “Most people would think I am more pretty than handsome.”

Now, it is Sol's face that Yohan cups with his palm. "And?" the knight asks, as Sol continues to kneel before him. "Am I not allowed to see the man in you, Sol?"

Sol feels Yohan twitch between his hand.

There is a moment of silence between them, until the knight mumbles again between his rugged pants, "Am I not?" Yohan's brows arch upward in a meek show of concern.

Sol's face warms at the words, without giving it much thought, he continues to rub at Yohan's tip with three of his fingers; as he mutters the words under his breaths, "Then, I wish I had your eyes..." *Because I don't see him yet*, Sol thinks.

Not like that.

And it's upsetting.

"Oh—Gods, *Sol*," Yohan moans, his thighs tremble, he thrusts into Sol's hand. "S-Sorry." The knight chuckles then smirks, before he faces Sol once more as he tries to regain his bearings—only for Sol to work at his cock until it is spilling, translucent pearl spread onto his fingertips. "What was it that you said?" he pants. "I was a little"—he fucks into Sol's hand again with a grunt—"distracted."

But Sol shakes his head. "Nothing." *Nevermind*. He pumps Yohan's cock harder, then parts his lips at the sight of every bead of slick heat slipping down the knight's erection. "Wow, a lot came out."

"Of course, that would happen..." Yohan sounds a lot more flustered than what Sol would have expected. "I've not..." Sol's knight brings a palm to cover his face, then groans in what sounds like both pleasure and mild embarrassment. "It has... It has been a while for me, too."

"Oh." Sol supposes it never occurred to him. "Are you like me?"

"Not exactly." Yohan sighs into his palm again; Sol watches the steady rise and fall of his chest. "However abstinence, and everything in between, has made this entire journey feel like a moment of firsts once more."

"I see." Sol smirks. He leans forward, until his lips are dangerously close to Yohan's cock. He wonders what it would feel like for Yohan to be inside him. His beloved is so big *and warm*... Sol imagines himself straddling Yohan's hips, slipping his breeches off, then pushing Yohan into his heat. He stares up at the knight. "Your cock arouses me so much..."

He loves how Yohan twitches at his confession.

As Sol draws circles around the head of Yohan's cock, he observes with pure delight when Yohan's come sticks to his fingers. He breathes, hot puffs onto the knight's slick, before he parts his lips then licks his own fingers clean.

Yohan's breaths quicken.

Ah, Sol thinks, *what is this feeling?* He is having too much fun. He never thought sex could be *like this*. He wants to wrap his lips around Yohan's cock and watch the man unravel beneath him. Perhaps, Yohan guesses what is on Sol's mind with a single look at his face, for the knight starts panting as keeps Sol's gaze; his cock twitches again and more thick white seed spills down his erection, Sol has rarely seen him look so aroused.

The expression on Yohan's face does things to Sol that drive him to a lust he hadn't known he owned. He wants to have this man.

He wants him.

He wants him.

He needs him.

"Sol, I am—" Yohan tries to pull away, however both he and Sol are too lost swimming in their own excitement, to be quick enough to do so. Yohan comes with a growl, all over himself and his armor, and on Sol's face, too. "*Shit*," the knight looks to the world around him in daze. "Fuck, I apologize, there's so much—"

But Sol begins to lick the knight's seed off his lips. "I knew this might happen when I kneeled for you." He is indifferent, albeit a little proud and happy, that he was able to make Yohan climax like this. He smiles as he stares up to his knight again. "I don't mind it, Yohan."

"Still—" Yohan thumbs at Sol's cheek, and accidentally drags some of his come along with the movement. "We should go clean ourselves up." Yohan pauses, before he leans down to kiss Sol, loving and slow. "Thank you, Sol, that was..."

Sol tilts his head. "Yes?"

Yohan looks away from him, he lowers his voice. "I've never felt as wanted as that."

Sol parts his lips, he considers reminding Yohan that he has pined for him for years now, yet he settles for merely embracing the knight with all his

strength. *There will be time for that talk later.* “I want you more every day.” It is Sol’s truth. And it scares him, sometimes.

Yohan doesn’t reply with words, instead he rests his face into the crook of Sol’s shoulder and holds him close. “Sol,” he whispers, after a moment—and there is so much love, so much intimate longing in his tone, that Sol feels as though the knight’s voice embraces him alone. “*Sol.*” He cannot say for how long it is that they remain this way, yet the two of them linger well past the sunrise, lost to each other’s warmth as they exchange the heat of each other’s skinship, body and soul.

At some point, Sol rests his head against Yohan’s thigh and watches, silent, when Yohan becomes erect again. A wanting stirs inside him. “Yohan,” he whispers, whilst clenching his thighs together. “I want...to feel you in my mouth.”

“My heart,” Yohan traps chestnut strands between his fingers then pushes, tucks the hair back behind Sol’s ear. “Stop whenever you want,” he whispers before he runs his hand through Sol’s hair and lets it rest there, tender, against his head. “All right?”

Sol’s eyes flutter until they are half-lidded again, and his gaze fills with hunger, *excitement*. He slowly kisses Yohan’s cock in a tentative manner as Yohan holds his hair, the knight strokes the crown of his head in gentle encouraging motions. Soon, Yohan lets out a heavy breath—in it, Sol can hear tension; how the knight is holding back, likely from moving, thrusting into his mouth.

When Sol has gathered the confidence, he parts his lips and drags his tongue across the thick vein running down Yohan’s cock—and it is then that Sol feels Yohan shiver.

Yohan bites down on the growl that reverberates in his throat—the low, drawn out sounds he makes whenever Sol licks him in every right place only feeds Sol’s cravings for this man. Sol presses his lips to Yohan’s balls in a soft kiss before he sucks on the knight’s wet cock again, he is consumed with a growing appetite and greed to experience his lover, who twitches in his mouth, spurting hot nectar down his throat. “Sol, *you—*”

Sol tilts his head forward then parts his lips again, he will taste every part of his beloved, until the memory, the weight of Yohan’s cock heavy against his tongue is one he can feel on command. He moves, in a rhythm so slow that it is

painful, however Sol yearns to take it all in. He looks Yohan in the eye as Yohan continues to caress his hair; he doesn't ever break away from his gaze.

The sloppy, wet sounds that fill the barn are indecent, Sol cannot believe his lips on Yohan's cock are the cause. *He is finally, finally indulging in the man of his dreams, and oh how divine that is.* He suckles on the tip of Yohan's manhood, licks circles into the perfect cleft of his cock, like he had pictured himself doing so many a time in his imagination—but *none of those visions could ever compare to the real thing.* Not when Sol can glance upward and be treated to the sight of Yohan being undone by his lips; the knight's face reddening, his mouth aquiver as he grunts, Yohan's eyes cross slightly for an instant before he keels over with another gasp. Yohan briefly squeezes Sol's hair and then, the warmth hits Sol's tongue.

The taste is unique, to say the least, but Sol swallows everything like a parched man.

When he pulls away from the knight, a content smirk is smeared across Sol's mouth. "That was fun." Sol glances up to Yohan, who is still catching his breaths.

He reaches out, to lock his and the knight's fingers together. He tilts his head. "Yohan," Sol mumbles. "Was it good? I... I didn't hurt you, did I?"

"Hurt me?" A soft, breathy chuckle leaves Yohan. "Now, where did that idea come from?"

Sol blinks, twice, before he looks away briefly from his lover; he thinks back to Yohan's face mere seconds ago. "You um... seemed like you were going through a lot. Physically."

Yohan leans in to kiss him. The knight's tongue pushes Sol's teeth apart—and soon, they are exploring each other's mouths, languid and slow.

When Yohan pulls away, he is smiling. "I was," he tells Sol, his voice is low and soft. "I was going through so much, my heart," he chuckles. "You've no idea. Nobody has ever... kissed my cock like that, as if it were my mouth." Yohan reaches out to thumb at Sol's jawline. "It was quite the sensual display, and I was madly aroused."

Sol's face warms. As his shoulders give in to a flustered rise, he isn't sure what to do with himself anymore. Eventually, he leans forward to wrap his arms around his beloved knight's broad shoulders, then buries his face into the crook of Yohan's neck; the knight's scent is intoxicating. "Ah." Sol's voice is trembling

as the morning's events all catch up to him. "I'm glad," he whispers. "I was as well, and I'd hoped..."

That you felt the same.

Amid the brightness of birdsong and the delicate sounds of a rustling nearby river, they remain in the barn for a couple minutes longer, until Yohan eventually rises to his feet.

Sol tries to follow in his footsteps—but his knees quiver then shake, almost giving under his weight before Yohan swiftly catches him, with one arm wound tight around his waist. "Dear heart, are you unwell?"

"I'm fine." Sol shows his knight a weak grin. "I only got up too quickly, don't look so worried." Sol reaches for Yohan to leave a caress of endearment against his cheek, when he shifts and notices an uncomfortable dampness in his undergarments; with a gulp, Sol makes a mental note to change his attire once they've both cleaned up.

The two opt to use the riverside for the sake of convenience and speed. For the first few seconds of their journey there, Sol leans against Yohan, until his legs do not feel as numb. Around them, the drifting sounds of nature's rustic beauty float through the air as Sol and Yohan walk through a minute patch of the forest. Sol wonders when it was that he started to find himself truly comfortable with the idea of depending on Yohan.

It all happened so naturally, as if it has always been.

And now, Sol looks forward to the days where they may grow ever closer. He yearns to dive into the ocean that Yohan is, despite all the risks, he wants to swim.

He wants to live.

He pours water on his face from the stream.

It is cold, and that is new, because for once Sol is not numb. He realizes he's been feeling a little more like himself lately. The world has more color than it once used to. The sounds all around are clearer. His heart is lighter to-day.

Yet, when Sol catches his reflection in the stream staring back at him in the visage of Solange, that very discomfort returns. He squints at the water then plunges his closing hand inside it, as if catching a bug, until his fist erases her reflection.

"What's wrong?"

Yohan's sudden voice slices his train of thought in two.

"H-Huh?" Sol pulls away from the water, he blinks, his fingers are dripping wet as he stares at the knight. "Why would something be..." Sol bites his lip, and down on the words. *He supposes, there is no use in pretending—Yohan already knows.*

As the water continues to flow downstream, ricocheting across its rocks within, Sol huffs and grasps at pieces of his hair between his thumb and forefinger that fall over his shoulders. "I want to cut it."

"Right now?"

Sol shakes his head. "Eventually." He smiles. "One day."

Yohan nods. "Well, I'm sure it'll suit you," he returns Sol's grin then ruffles his hair. "You'll be even more handsome than you are now."

Idiot, Sol thinks. "You keep saying that..." *Even though Sol feels it isn't true.* And yet it makes him happy, more grounded in some ways—Sol wonders if he may not be the fool, here, considering how good Yohan is able to make him feel with but a few trivial words. "We should get going," he mumbles, as he rises to his feet with his arms tense by his sides. "Our clothes are probably dry by now." Sol shies away from Yohan's gaze. "And, Yohan?"

"Yes?"

"Thank you." Sol's fingertips dig into his palms, leaving pale crescent moons behind, he sighs, his voice soft. "I don't really know how to explain it—*perhaps, it is silly to even say this*—but traveling with you, and meeting you... I feel like you have opened my heart."

Yohan finds Sol's hand, he gives it a squeeze. As the birds continue singing in the sky, as the sun bathes the lands in golden light, Sol takes another breath. "Thank you."

I'm glad I met you.

* * *

One night over the campfire, Sol learns Yohan was a great consumer of his and Androcles' teashop brews before they eventually closed that odd chapter in their

lives. *As much as it amazes him how they'd been connected in more ways than he'd initially assumed, the rest of their travels are rather uneventful...*

In the mornings, Yohan always kisses Sol long and slow, until they finally rouse hours later from their shared tent.

By noon, Sol already burns through great portions of his ingredients, that he grinds into a multitude of potions in the name of Yohan's King: crafting such intricate medicine on the road is far from easy and in fact quite the demanding task, however, Sol's mentor has taught him well. Sol finds himself grateful with each passing day, for the knowledge Androcles has left behind for him to use like some odd, invisible keepsake.

At dusk, Sol and Yohan always collapse from exhaustion—Sol, especially, sleeps like he has never slept before. It feels as though he is finally getting proper rest after all these years, despite the lack of any Gods damned potions his slumber weighs heavier than Yohan's, who spends most of his nights watching over their camp the closer their journey brings them to his King.

But, all of these things were yesterday's problems.

Today is different.

Today, they have finally arrived.

The city streets are bustling with more faces than Sol has seen in years—last time he was surrounded by such thick crowds, was back when he still studied magic in that *wretched place*. The air is thick with an uncomfortable heat, the pavement burns warm beneath his feet. There are so many people around, banners floating abovehead between buildings, and travelers visiting from afar for what seems to be an ongoing festival—the fear of running into an old, familiar face seeps into Sol's veins. *A face he never wants to see again. A face he wishes he could forget.*

Sol takes a step back on instinct—until he and the dark silhouette that once laid by his feet are hidden beneath a building's shadow, a little behind Yohan. Sol hugs his arms closer to his chest. "It's so noisy," he mutters.

"Come, then," Yohan tells him, as he holds out his hand for Sol to take. His smile is warm, welcoming, as he glances to where Sol stands. "The palace will be calmer."

Sol swallows, hard. He does not want to walk out in the open again, *but... it isn't as though he can linger here all day*. After staring at his boots in quiet dismay

for another second, Sol eventually steps forward, then grabs Yohan's hand without ever looking back at the crowd.

"Gladly." Sol would rather not know if his old mentors or comrades are around.

Yohan leads him through the city, past marketplaces where everything from fresh fruit to strange trinkets are proudly on display. Plenty more banners of color fly through the air, alongside wisps of confetti, all of them float thanks to the aid of magic. Yohan never lets go of Sol once, until they have made it past the celebratory chaos and Yohan has guided him to tall stone steps guarded by many a soldier, guards neatly aligned like perfect statues adorned in a wash of pristine silvers.

The weight of the medicine Sol has crafted suddenly weighs heavy in his satchel. The young apothecary gulps as he steps forward and prays that his skills alone will be enough to save the old King. Yet, before they even have the opportunity to enter the palace, a guard comes running toward Yohan. "Yohan!" he calls out.

Sol observes the way Yohan's back tenses as the knight straightens up. It does not seem as though this meeting was planned. "Is—" Yohan swallows, hard. "Is His Majesty—"

Dead? Sol wonders before Yohan can even speak the word. Deep dread washes over him as he stares at the hexagonal tiled pavement, there is a dizzying buzz in Sol's mind, the steps seem to give and swirl under his feet, it finds Sol wondering, *Were they too late, after all?*

"Nonsense!" The soldier laughs, and suddenly, Sol can breathe again. "Don't look so serious. Man, you've always been so uptight! But we wouldn't let him die that easily—we merely moved him to his estate so that he may rest in a safer, quieter location until the festivities die down! I've come to escort you on his behalf, in his carriage. Royal orders, ye' hear." The soldier nods Yohan's way. "You must be tired of traveling on foot, aye?" He peers over Yohan's shoulder—right at Sol. "The young lady, too."

Sol tenses, and his heart aches. Walking through the wilderness by Yohan's side had been a respite from the assuming gazes of others. *But now, it's happening again.* "Yes..." Sol shrinks in on himself. "I suppose..." He doesn't mean to sound so dejected and empty when he speaks, but this entire hour has been akin to

opening one's eyes and violently being ripped awake from a happy dream. Sol forces a smile as he wills himself to stare at the guard, he sinks again, into a lie whose weight he'd once gotten so used to carrying. "It would be nice, thank you."

Ah... Sol thinks to himself as his grin sours to a bittersweet quiver. This is so much more difficult now that he knows what freedom, what existing, feels like.

The guard walks on ahead and exclaims for them to follow with great enthusiasm, and Yohan takes Sol's hand in his. "Sol." The knight sounds worried. "You could have told him, it was all right."

"I..." Sol parts his lips, then stares at the ground in silence anew. "I don't want to cause trouble for you. Not when you're leaving so soon, too."

Yohan squeezes Sol's hand as he, in turn, lowers his voice to a whisper. "Sol, my heart, I understand where you're coming from but—please, do not hold your soul back from being itself for my sake. It would pain me more to know you are choosing my entourage's opinions over your own discomfort." Yohan releases Sol's hand, then steps forward to follow their guide. "The King needs you, Sol." Yohan clears his throat. "It feels wrong to say it this way, however... even if they were to have opinions about you, I doubt they would choose to voice them aloud, considering you are here to save His Majesty's life: they've no choice *but* to treat you as an honored guest."

Sol scoffs. "Right. But they could *also* threaten my life, keep me in a dungeon, and force me to work, and—" *Sol's breaths are quickening as his thoughts race. He needs to calm down.* "I-I would have no choice in the matter, but to obey if I wanted a chance at surviving."

Yohan stops in his steps—as he pauses, his arms tense by his sides. "Sol," the knight glances at Sol from over his own shoulder. "Do you truly think I would let them take you? Do you truly think..." Yohan reaches for Sol's wrist, then looks him in the eye. "That I would let them do that to you?"

Sol's brows arch in an upward pained manner. He had never even considered that Yohan may come to his aid; in his mind, he was still *powerless, alone*. "I..." Sol averts his gaze away from Yohan's. "N-No. No, of course not, but it's hard not to question whether I've even earned the right to stand beside you. When I'm just..." His voice trails off. Sol purses his lips together. Tears well in his eyes. *Gods, please—he does not want to cry. Not now.*

Yohan releases him before he rests a palm against Sol's shoulder. The weight and reassuring pressure of the knight's big strong hand causes Sol to look upwards, his lips agape in a vulnerable show. "Please," Yohan tells Sol in earnest, "be at ease, and make yourself at home" He shows Sol an honest, welcoming smile. "You belong here just as much as anyone else does, Sol."

"Yohan? Miss?" The soldier calls out from the top of the stairs. "Are you both well down there?"

Though Yohan's brow twitches, likely upon hearing the title of miss being applied to Sol again, he waves back effortlessly at the man. "We will be right there!" Clearly, the knight is better at pretending than most would give him credit for.

* * *

Forgoing the need to travel on foot is indeed a welcome change of pace, Sol's only goal now being watching the scenery waltz by whilst he counts each field, in wait of their arrival at the King's fabled estate. Sol finds he quite likes the countryside, the rare herd of cows eating at the grass that they encounter from afar is an endearing sight, there is something rather cozy about it all—Sol is certain he will treasure this moment of quaint little peace as a fond memory in the years to come.

Yohan is seated beside Sol with the most perfect posture Sol has ever seen from a man riding a carriage, meanwhile the soldier from earlier on slouches on the velvet adorned seat opposite of them; he has his arms crossed, and he's giving Sol quite the intense, confused look. Sol wonders if he should speak up, eventually deciding to, for he begins to wonder if a spider has not crafted a web on his nose. "Is... something the matter?" Sol asks the soldier.

It seems the soldier didn't expect to be questioned, *or* somehow believed he was being subtle, for he immediately perks up against his seat and clears his throat. "Nothing too important," the soldier shrugs. "I was mostly wondering if you'd borrowed that robe."

Sol blinks. "Pardon?"

“The patterns and the shape of it—it’s a man’s robe, ain’t it? I rarely see women wearing them. Or, whenever they do, it’s to honor a deceased husband.” He clicks his tongue. “But you still *seem* quite young, so I was curious.”

It occurs to Sol that this man should mind his own business.

Sol brings a hand to his chest, atop the robe, above his heart. “It’s mine,” he tells the soldier. “I liked it, so I bought it for myself.”

The soldier’s attention turns to Yohan. “You’ve an interesting traveling companion, that’s for sure.” He scoffs, and Sol’s throat turns into a tight, anxious knot.

But Yohan merely raises an eyebrow at the soldier. “What are you trying to imply?”

“Nothing.” The soldier smiles in the most dishonest display Sol has ever seen, he presses his palms together. “I was merely stating facts.”

Yohan grins back at him, all unassuming, and casual. “It has been quite some time since I’ve silenced a man with my blade. As a Rider close to his retirement, I do wonder if I would still be any good at it.”

The soldier’s face scrunches up into an ugly scowl. “Is that a threat, Yohan?”

“Not at all!” Yohan meets his eyes and chuckles. “I am merely stating facts—to which, speaking of facts,” Yohan wraps an arm around Sol’s shoulder and pulls him close again. “Sol will be aiding His Majesty during His recovery. I suggest you show some respect.”

Sol cannot help the smirk that pulls at his lips. “Indeed,” he says as he stares at the soldier—he isn’t quite sure what right Yohan has to make him feel so powerful for once in his meek little life, but Sol is certainly savoring it. *He could get used to such power.* Sol raises his brows at the soldier. It is petty, but he feels the need to say it anyway. “Another fact for you, Sir, since you seem so fond of them.”

The soldier shrinks in on himself. As he holds his sides, he grumbles a rather annoyed, “Nevermind...” The rest of the ride is peaceful, almost amusing even, Sol can scarce make sense of how quickly the situation was turned around; this has made him rather hopeful about his stay among royals.

Sol observes Yohan with adoration and admiration. Warmth rises to his face. *Yohan wasn’t lying. It seems he truly does have Sol’s back.*

They arrive at the royal estate later in the afternoon.

Sol is immediately led to the King's manor, right up into His Majesty's bedroom.

With Yohan at his side, Sol peers past the open door and greets the King with a modest bow and nod. He isn't sure what else to do, he's never been in front of royalty before, especially not a bedridden King. "Hello...Your Majesty?" Sol gives the wood doorframe a shy, unassuming knock. "May we come in?"

"Y-Yes..." The King's tone is frail, but, the fact that he can still speak at all is a hopeful sign. With a trembling hand, His Majesty points to a corner of the room where a wooden chair and table stand empty, ready to be used.

"Oh!" Sol nods again upon understanding the request. "Of course, Your Majesty. R-Right away!" He rushes over to the table then sets down his satchel across it, from which he softly pours out his belongings. Not a minute later—and to Sol's relief—a healer joins his side. *It seems he will not have to do this alone.* The two waste no time getting to work. Sol barely has a moment to bid his temporary farewells to Yohan as he collaborates with the healer, Celestina, he learns. They work until sundown.

"Gosh, this one's a tough one, isn't it?" Celestina wipes the sweat away from her brow as she and Sol exit the room then make for the manor's veranda. Celestina pulls back her long, curly auburn hair. "Ain't used to dealing with ancient curses like those..." She huffs, then presses two hands to her knees.

And, *truly?* Sol wonders—she seemed perfectly attuned to the work back there, to the point where Sol even found himself questioning if she'd been practicing the arts for longer than him and his mentor combined.

"But!" Celestina glances up to Sol, "I think His Majesty will be all right, thanks to you." The young healer smirks. "Those potions, their properties are really impressive. Still can't believe you made 'em yourself!"

Sol hooks a hand around the back of his neck and lets out a bashful laugh. "I tried my best." Something about this woman feels off, as if she isn't exactly whom she claims to be, but Sol gets caught up in her flattery and quickly forgets his concerns. *For a court healer to be complimenting his skills like this... his confidence has definitely risen in the last minute, to say the least.* "Y-You're quite gifted yourself." Sol shows her a shy grin. "Thank you for your help today."

"The pleasure's all mine!"

The two of them make small talk for a short while longer, about the most complicated curses they've ever encountered, cures, and the best ingredients in the land—until they finally retire for their quarters, bidding each other farewell for the night.

“Phew,” Sol shuts his eyes as he huffs, then dusts off his robe. “What a day...” Sol is barely paying enough attention, when he runs into Yohan's chest. “Oh. Shit.” He blinks a few times before staring back up to the knight with glee, Sol rises, standing on his tiptoes to get a better look at his lover. “Yohan!” Sol rubs his nose as he grins. “Hi.”

Without wasting another moment, Yohan steps forward to kiss his forehead. “Greetings,” he whispers, and Sol can feel the knight smiling against his skin; Yohan rests his hand on Sol's jaw. “I was ordered to lead you to your quarters,” he tells Sol, “dinner should be waiting for you there, since you finished work quite late. Are you ready to leave?”

Sol glances over his shoulder at the empty hallways of the manor, that all glitter orange from the candlelight slowly burning out in the large chandeliers above head, like little distant starshine, he turns back to Yohan and nods. “I'm ready.”

On the nearby wall, a rather worn family portrait hangs as if keeping watch over the room, the eyes of the people within seem oddly alive—as their glares follow Sol, the young apothecary makes a mental note to have a better glance at the piece later.

Sol and Yohan walk outside; the gardens glimmer with the dim sheen of fireflies. Yohan leads Sol by the hand towards a small cottage, not too far from the main house and manor. “The gardener recently left his post to care for his wife and their newborn daughter,” Yohan tells Sol as they near. “His house has stood empty ever since—you're free to use it as you wish.” Yohan pauses before the cottage, his imposing height makes the cottage's entrance seem tiny in comparison; the knight opens a quaint wood door, whose ebony bark has been carved with patterns resembling flowers and vines. He nods Sol's way. “Make yourself at home, Sol.”

There is a click as the door creaks, revealing the cottage's rather cozy interior. The walls have been painted an off-white shade. Clean empty pots, likely once used to make jam, stand on the kitchen counter. The bed is lined with

gingham cloth, and pale curtains resembling pearl butterfly wings are draped across the windows. Sol immediately likes it here, more than he thought he would—even though he has only *just* stepped inside, the place already feels like home.

“So? What are your thoughts?” Yohan asks as he pauses beside him. “If it is a tad *too* small, I could arrange for you to stay at another—”

“No!” Sol blurts, before he shakes his head. “It’s...” He looks around his new twee, temporary comfort of an abode again, and lets out a joy-filled sigh. “It’s perfect.” *But a question remains unanswered in Sol’s mind.* “What about you?” he asks Yohan as he turns towards his lover, his voice trails off, “will you be staying at...”

Before Sol has a chance at finishing his thought, Yohan shrugs. “I have my designated quarters back at the manor.”

“O-Oh. I see.” Perhaps, it was foolish of Sol to assume they’d still be sleeping together, once they had arrived. *Of course, they wouldn’t—why would they have need for shared quarters, when there is much more than a mere tent to go around here?*

“Disappointed?”

Sol glances upward. “H-Huh?” He finds, that his knight is smiling now. “Me? I...” Sol reaches for his elbow, then gives it a squeeze. He purses his lips together. “Well, maybe a little, if I’m being honest.”

Yohan strides toward him then takes Sol’s hands in his. The two face each other once more. “I am not beholden to my quarters, just so you know.”

There is a brief moment in which neither of them say a word as Sol blinks a few times, he brings his attention to the floor, then back to Yohan. “Oh.” Sol can feel his face warm and, for lack of a better thing to do, he slips a strand of his hair behind his ear. “I—” Sol reaches for Yohan’s waist, he pulls the knight in closer. It feels a tad new and has him bashful to be saying this, considering they always had no choice but to share a bed until today. *But...* “I’d love it if you stayed, Yohan.”

Yohan grins again as he stares down at Sol, he leans in to press their lips together, then nibbles on Sol’s lower lip. The very act pulls a whimper, a stifled moan from Sol.

Sol shuts his eyes. He focuses on the cool feeling of Yohan’s fingers caressing invisible paths down the back of his neck. He leans into the knight, his breaths

growing heavier by the second.

Oh, Sol thinks to himself with his lips agape as he relishes in the moment, a prickle of warmth spreads through his shoulders, down his chest. *I want him.*

I want Yohan.

“Yohan, I want you.”

Yohan’s lips are on his again—but their kiss is chaste, short-lived, like winter devouring autumn. Until spring shows itself again in the knight’s eyes, when he gazes into Sol, instilled with the flicker of a lustful yearning Sol can only but reciprocate.

Yohan grunts, the low sound reverberates against Sol’s neck. “I want you, too,” the knight whispers; and Sol fears that his lover will drive him mad with passion, because has never *wanted* as much as he wants Yohan tonight.

It is not long before they are kissing again, moaning into one another’s mouth, with devotion that warms Sol to his deepest bones. “Sh-Should we shower first?” Sol offers, panting, his voice soft, when they are forced to pull away to catch their breaths.

Yohan nods. “A good idea.” He laughs then pinches Sol’s cheek. “It’s been a while.” As he continues to hold onto Sol’s hand, Yohan leads Sol into the bathroom. And Sol’s eyes widen at the pleasant surprise that awaits them. It is lovely to see a shower with the option for hot water, for once, Sol does not get to use them often; in fact, the last time he can remember seeing one was during his studies.

Those dorms were all considered luxurious for good reason.

Just like the rest of the cottage the bathroom tiles across the walls, too, are adorned with pastel floral shapes. The entire choice of decoration leaves Sol feeling as though he is inside a large quilt, once he steps past the dark wooden door frame.

Yohan grips at the shower’s faucets then turns on the water. He strips quickly without much hesitance nor seeming afterthought, before he steps underneath the lukewarm stream.

Sol gulps once, as he braces himself to do the same. It is truth that he had bared himself to the knight in the past... yet, it was never *like this*, under lamplight, in whole.

“Sol?” Yohan calls from inside the shower. “My love? Are you all right?”

Sol grips tight at his robe. “I-I feel nervous.”

“Should we slow—”

“No! It’s fine.” Sol eyes the shower. “It’s fine,” he echoes. “I merely... need a moment.” He stares down to velvet cloth that had protected him from taking proper shape inside the world, like a second skin. He takes a deep breath, then peels it off.

Every second is a slow agony.

Sol’s body tenses. He holds his breath. His eyes are shut as he rips himself away from the comfort of his own existence in the world. He knows it is futile to be afraid, and yet still, he worries Yohan may see him differently after this—*even if not as Solange, as a mixture of Sol and Solange together, perhaps*—he does not want Sol to disappear.

“Sol,” Yohan repeats again, his voice a hushed comfort, that Sol only now realizes he’d needed to hear. “What do you need, my heart?”

“You...” Sol brings a hand to his heart as he inhales another shy, sharp breath. “I need you.”

All these years have led to this—have led him to Yohan.

He doesn’t want to stop.

Not now.

Sol walks forward whilst looking at the ground, he keeps his jaw tilted downward to avoid the bathroom’s mirror; *no need to have his confidence broken now that he’s found some.*

He sees Yohan’s legs first, and then, the knight’s thighs, his cock. “Hi...” Sol still can’t bring himself to face him. But he takes the final step needed to enter the shower, then buries his face into the knight’s chest.

Like always, Yohan imparts Sol with a gentle touch as he threads his fingers through Sol’s hair, petting the back of his head—the act brings Sol a great solace. It is like nothing has changed. “Hey.” Yohan embraces him, until their bodies are pressed close together with nowhere to hide. “My love?”

“W-What?” Perhaps, this is no big deal to Yohan, but Sol is being brave. He is being very brave, and resisting the urge to run away, to put his clothes back on and never face his own body again. And yet, at the same time, he *wants* to experience... *this. The undeniably raw, intimacy of Yohan’s skin pressed to his.*

“You’re trembling, Sol.”

"I-I know." Sol heaves in a breath. "I know..." He bites into his lower lip. "I'm sorry. This is—" He heaves in another breath. "This is more than I'm used to."

Yohan cups Sol's jaw with his palm. "You've nothing to apologize for." Their eyes meet beneath the warmth of the water, the knight's gaze is pained. "Tell me, my heart, how may I lessen your burden?"

Sol gulps, and he feels the saliva trickle down his throat. "Guide me?" he asks, his voice a whisper as he embraces Yohan in turn. "I trust you." He runs his hands up the knight's spine. *It is only because I trust you, he thinks, because you are my safety—that I am able to step into the fire of your gaze, Yohan.*

Yohan takes Sol's fingers between the shelter of his palms and rests them gently on the wall. As the water drenches them, Sol glances up to Yohan through lidded eyes. He presses a kiss to the knight's lips. And his knight kisses back—Yohan sucks on Sol's lower lip, he pushes his tongue past Sol's teeth that open for him. And Sol moans, makes sounds he has never made in this lifetime as his back arches off the wall, *Yohan is so warm.* The steam from the shower has Sol's head spinning. *Yohan is so warm.* His fingers are now twined deeply with Sol's own. *Yohan is so warm.* He reminds Sol of the sun.

And Sol wants to fly.

They wash one another, with both their hands exploring each other's bodies. The shower mist smells like lavender and Yohan like pine; when Sol hugs him again, he feels the knight's hardening cock brush up against his thigh and jolts away slightly, at first, until he takes another breath; then thinks, *Calm yourself, Sol.*

Yohan would never.

He wouldn't—

Yohan pulls away. "Sorry." He places a gentle hand atop Sol's arm, before he pauses. "Would you like to stop?"

Sol shakes his head. He stands on the tips of his toes and wraps his arms around Yohan's shoulders. And he focuses on the feel of their chests pressed together, their hearts beating like one, the adoration he feels for this man who has been nothing but reverent and kind to him throughout this entire journey. "I want us to make love, Yohan." Sol hears a small gasp leave Yohan's lips, he pauses. "Do you?"

Yohan deepens their embrace. He cups Sol's chin between his palm and presses his lips to Sol's forehead—though he does not kiss, merely, he speaks against Sol's skin. His voice is shaking as he whispers the words, "Of course, I do." As the shower drenches them in wet heat, Yohan washes the soap off Sol's back, and Sol wipes the tiny, iridescent suds away from the brave curve of the knight's shoulders.

They shut off the water soon after.

And Yohan lifts Sol into his arms. And Sol lets himself be lifted. As Yohan carries him to the bed, Sol's mind spins with arousal, mixed with brief glimpses of his visions from the past.

Sol remembers the promise he'd made to himself many moons ago, *never to take this as far as they are about to take this tonight*. And yet, Sol can resist the pull of him no longer.

Sol's elbows press into the bed's soft cotton linen. The room is dark. Candlelight in the hallway bleeds dark gold orange hues that flicker, cast over the edge of the bedroom with no walls where Sol glances up at Yohan, and runs a hand down the knight's left clavicle, atop a scar he had never noticed before. With parted lips, Sol asks him quietly, "Did it hurt?"

Yohan laughs and Sol finds the lines across his face endearing, they are a badge of honor, proof that he has survived to tell his tale. The knight smiles. "It was the first day I thought I would die for real."

Sol's index finger finds the knight's lips once more. "And yet, here you are."

Yohan's lips collide with his. There is a throaty grunt that escapes and rises from the knight's half-parted mouth—when Yohan kisses him it is like they are in that tent again from all those days ago, losing themselves to one another, the air full of electric passion that warms Sol's blood with starvation for his touch.

"Sol," Yohan's words are hushed as they fade into heat that warms Sol's lips. A certain sense of urgency lingers in his lover's tone, Sol can tell the knight does not hold as much patience as he most often does, he is pining that is clear. "I don't want to hurt you."

Sol stares up at his beloved through lidded eyes. "You won't." With one hand lining Yohan's jaw, he feels the knight's pulse dance beneath his fingertips. *Thump, thump, thump, thump*. "You won't," Sol echoes again, and he believes it this time. "I know you won't."

Yohan tenses above him. His brows arch upward, ever so slightly; Sol wonders if he may cry. “Thank you,” he holds Sol close to his chest again, “for trusting me.” *Nobody has ever truly done so in my life*—words Yohan needn’t say linger between them like sea-fireflies hold to the shorelines at night. “My heart,” Yohan rests his big, warm palm against Sol’s back. “It doesn’t have to be this way,” he hushes Sol, who is still trembling despite helplessly *aching* for them to do this. “Why don’t we slow down?”

“H-How?”

Yohan caresses the back of Sol’s head as they embrace on the bed. “Here,” he leads Sol until they are seated across the mattress again, their knees straddling each other’s waists. Yohan strokes Sol’s back and leaves a kiss against his shoulder. The two of them lean into each other’s warmth—and, for a moment, they stay *just like this*.

Sol shuts his eyes, Yohan’s touch is so pleasant, he could lose himself in it. And he does, when Yohan asks him, “Can I give you a massage?”

“*Please...*” Sol sighs into him, and Yohan starts with his arms, his shoulders and his back, until he lays Sol down atop the bed again. The knight’s hands find Sol’s stomach, his hips and—although Sol holds his breaths when Yohan nears his thighs, the knight merely moves onto his knees as if nothing were amiss, and relief settles in Sol’s heart. *He knew Yohan wouldn’t, still, seeing him respecting those boundaries now that they are here further cements that truth in his heart.*

As Yohan moves down to Sol’s legs, easing every little bit of tension from his calves, Sol sinks into the pleasant feeling of his lover’s fingers rolling across his muscle. The knight cups Sol’s ankle between his palms, then kisses the top of his foot. “You can close your eyes if you want to, Sol,” he whispers. “It’s okay.”

And Sol does. He drifts off into a pleasant elsewhere, and focuses on the tenderness of Yohan’s hands massaging the soles of his feet. “Yohan...” Sol mumbles with his arms splayed across the bed, as he takes a deep, peaceful breath. “This is so nice...”

“Is it?” He hears the smile in Yohan’s voice when the knight sighs. “I’m glad.”

After a few minutes have gone by, Yohan joins him atop the bed again, they lay there together in a comfortable silence. Yohan holds Sol, and rubs his back like before. And it is then that Sol realizes—he isn’t trembling anymore.

Yohan was right. Making love didn't have to feel this way—it didn't have to be complicated, a fear Sol needed to face.

It could be simple.

Just like this.

Sol smiles.

Just like now.

"My dearest." Yohan's mellow voice fills the silence once more, and Sol leans into him, into his chest as the knight kisses his forehead. "What now? If you are tired, we can sleep together—"

Sol presses his lips to Yohan with a grin. "I want to dream with you, awake in this bed, beloved."

"Oh?" Yohan's chuckles, he peppers kisses along Sol's jaw. "Do tell me more," he growls, and Sol's breaths hitch. "In what ways shall I make you dream tonight?"

Sol runs his fingers through Yohan's hair, his gaze darkening with arousal as their eyes meet. "Take me," he tells the knight. "Take all of me."

For a moment, Yohan pauses. "Sol, are you certain?" he asks. "There are other ways in which we could enjoy ourselves. I am..." the knight gives his own crotch a brief stare, "*bigger* than my tongue. It may hurt, if I—"

"Then... use your fingers first," Sol mumbles as he averts his gaze then wraps his arms around the knight's neck. "I'm feeling... very good tonight. Yohan, I'd like to try if you're willing..."

Sol wonders if he could reclaim this part of his pleasure for himself—for it is true, he tires of it being ruined for him in this way, he wants to be able to enjoy every way of being intimate with his lover.

"Okay." Yohan nods, then inches closer to Sol again. He nudges their noses together. "Okay," he echoes, "I can try." Yohan kisses the tip of Sol's eyelash, a chuckle slips past his lips. And he starts to shift, and brings his hand lower to Sol's waist, when Sol shuts his eyes tight and freezes.

It is not long before Sol hears Yohan pause. "Sol?"

Sol blinks, then stares up to his knight—a look of worry is spread across Yohan's features as his brows arch upward.

"Yohan," Sol's starts as his lower lip quivers, helplessly, he reaches for his lover again then tugs at his arm. "Actually, I'm..." *There is an odd, anxious feeling*

growing inside him, now that he knows they are trying this for real. “I still want to, but I’m...a tad scared.”

Yohan strokes his hair. “What can I do to make it better, my heart?” he asks.

And Sol’s fingers tremble against Yohan’s skin. “I— I don’t know. I...” he says. “I want to try this—*truly I do*—but I worry about how my body might react. And what I could feel, once we a-are...” Sol’s voice trails off.

For a moment, neither of them say a word, until Yohan brushes the hair from Sol’s eyes. “I will always stop once you say the word, Sol.” Yohan kisses the wetness from the tear that has soaked Sol’s eyelid as he thumbs at Sol’s cheek. “I swear it on my life.” Loving fondness flashes through the knight’s gaze, alongside a sudden hint of playfulness when he peers into Sol’s eyes. “If you still wish to do this tonight, shall we try something?”

“Define, something.”

Yohan smirks. “Stopping.”

And Sol blinks again. “Oh. I...” *He did not expect that.* “I suppose?”

That does, indeed, feel like it could be of help. Sol quite appreciates his lover’s thoughtfulness. “Okay.” He reaches for Yohan’s wrist. “Um, is it fine if I lead you? And also—” Sol bites into his lower lip. “If it’s okay... could you distract me?” he blurts the words before he can truly think them through.

But... perhaps, that would not be such a bad idea.

His lover perks up. “Pardon?” Yohan does not sound offended, merely, confused.

“I-I— I don’t know?” Sol clings to Yohan’s neck as he looks away again, shy, his face warms with a bashful heat. “Maybe if we’re kissing while you finger me, it won’t feel too...startling.”

Now, it is Yohan who is blushing as his eyes widen, before he smiles then tucks Sol’s hair behind his ear. He leans in to kiss him, briefly, pulling away as he says, “I can certainly do that.” And soon, Sol is guiding his lover’s hand downward.

He shivers as Yohan’s warm palm slides down his belly until it is between his legs, but the softness of Yohan’s lips soothes him, Sol swallows, hard. “Can you touch my c-cock?” he asks Yohan, whilst looking him in the eyes—part of Sol still wants to flee, after being vulnerable before another, he is not quite sure how

he manages to stay nor where he finds the courage to; *it is possible Yohan's bravery has rubbed off on him in all sorts of ways.*

After all—a smile takes Sol's lips—he has never been so much himself, until lately.

As Yohan rubs soft, tentative circles into Sol's warmth, he asks Sol, "Right here?" Yohan is barely touching him, but *everything* feels ever so sensitive and Sol is biting down against a whimper. Yohan smiles. "My, you're so hard, dearest."

"Ah, *Gods*," Sol's fingers jerk against Yohan's shoulders, he breathes his lover's name into his mouth as they kiss again, "Y-Yohan."

He doesn't want to say it.

He truly doesn't, because it feels so *gods damned good*.

But Sol knows he must, lest his mind go places he doesn't want it to, once they sink deeper into the throes of their passion. "Stop?" he gasps, a word that is barely audible between his heavy pants, and yet, Yohan still hears him.

Yohan's hand is off him in less than a second. And Sol realizes how much attention the knight must have been paying to his every cue, something about this fact warms his heart, his face.

"Are you all right?" the knight asks Sol as he continues to stroke Sol's hair in slow, gentle ways. "How was that, my heart?"

"I..." Sol finds himself gulping. "I didn't actually want to stop," he admits; the words are pushed out of his lips like a rushed confession. "It felt so good, the way you were touching me..."

A relieved grin, and then, a sigh from the knight, "Did it, sweetling?" Yohan hums as he kisses Sol's cheek. "Shall I touch you again, then?"

And Sol's eyes flutter shut. "Yes," he inhales, whilst he rests his free hand against Yohan's forearm, then breathes the words out, "*Touch me.*"

Please.

I want you.

I want you so much.

Yohan slides his palm up, then down, across Sol's pussy. "You're doing so well, my love," he whispers as he kisses Sol—he barely pushes one digit past Sol's heat, before he massages him open in soft, gradual ways. "So, so well."

Sol's knees jerk as he feels the gentle burn, his eyes widen and he whines when Yohan moves. His thighs close in on themselves on instinct. His nails dig

into Yohan's arm as the knight's tongue slips past his lips. *It feels good, overwhelmingly so, but...* "Y-Yohan— Stop."

Yohan's touch is gone before Sol can even blink.

"Sorry..." Sol falls silent as he turns his head then looks up to Yohan.

"Don't be." Yohan peers back down at him, his brows knitted tight in worry—it seems Yohan is searching for a sign of discomfort amid Sol's face, for he is making the same expression as whenever he'd feared Sol had gotten hurt during their travels. "That stop sounded a bit more serious than the first one."

"I... I know." The burn of arousal still stirs in his groin, Sol truly *truly* doesn't want to stop—not yet. *But it is difficult, to know how to carry on*; everything is so muddled in his mind; it is so complicated to be left wanting and yet afraid, he can barely make sense of it. Sol looks up again, to his lover, *to Yohan*. "I'm sorry."

"What for, sweetest?" Yohan shows Sol a feeble grin. "You have done nothing wrong."

"Yohan, I—" he whimpers, "I truly want you. I do, I swear—"

"And you have me." His knight embraces him, closer, *closest*. "You have me, Sol," he whispers. "All of me. My body, my soul..." Yohan runs his hands across Sol's back, then holds him tightly, tender near to his heart. "You'll always have me."

Somehow, Sol knows it is the truth.

"Sol?" Yohan asks, after Sol has grown quiet for a minute, absent-minded as guilt eats at his heart. "You know, we do not have to do this tonight nor ever again, if it is unpleasant."

Sol, who grows dejected from hearing the words, glances to the mattress beneath them as the corners of his lips jerk downward. "I *wanted* to." Sol shakes his head. "I still do." He bites into his lower lip, and tries to hold the tears from forming around his eyelids. "I... You did so much for me—to make me comfortable—and I truly thought I was. And yet, I still c-can't..." He heaves in a small, shaken breath. "I'm sorry. I feel so broken."

Yohan slips his arms around Sol's shoulders and holds him close to his chest, *his heart*. "You're not broken." The knight sighs. "Far from it, Sol, you wouldn't be here today if you were." He thumbs a tear away from Sol's cheek and leans in, to press a kiss to his forehead. "There is nothing wrong with having scars." He deepens their embrace. "Sol, there is nothing wrong with you."

Yohan holds him for what feels like forever, and Sol listens to his lover's heartbeat without saying a word—outside, the grasshoppers sing, the moon is round and high in the sky, its ephemeral glow like daylight in the night time. “Thank you,” Sol eventually tells him, “for saying that. I—” Sol bites into his lower lip, he squeezes at Yohan's hand, now twined between his. “It's difficult, sometimes, to see it in any other light.”

“I see.” As Yohan rubs circles into Sol's back, he nods against him. “I understand.” Sol turns to press his lips atop Yohan's heart. He shuts his eyes.

“I don't want to move.”

The knight squeezes at his shoulder. “Then I won't go anywhere.” Sol smiles upon hearing the words. “Don't worry.”

As they cuddle amid a comfortable silence for what must at least be a good hour, waning in and out of slumber at times, eventually Sol falls asleep.

* * *

When Sol wakes it is still nighttime. His beloved remains by his side, holding him like he has never left once. Yohan's hand is rested atop Sol's shoulder, where he leaves gentle caresses across his bared skin. The knight's breaths are heavy as he, too, rouses slowly.

Sol surprises himself when the safety of Yohan's arms finds him yearning again. “Yohan?” he mumbles, after a long while.

Yohan caresses the top of his head. “Yes, my heart?”

“I want you...”

And Yohan falls silent for a minute, he tells Sol, “I am the same.” He rests a palm against Sol's shoulder. “I want you, too, my heart. But,” he pauses again, “what if we merely kept to kisses, for now? Or...” Sol hears him swallow. “I could pleasure your cock again...”

“Maybe.” Sol gives Yohan's forearm a squeeze as he considers it. “Yes, that sounds...” Sol takes Yohan's hand, his gaze blurs damp with a blissful overwhelm as he urges Yohan between his legs again, atop his most sensitive parts, “*Good*,” he hisses.

And Yohan chuckles. “Oh, I *see*.” As he presses his lips to Sol’s temple, he sighs. “I am most happy to please, then.”

Sol hiccups a moan once Yohan circles his cock again, just like before. Despite his apprehensions, there is no odd feeling of wrongness attached to the act anymore—in fact, *he finds, that he quite likes what is happening here.* “More,” he gasps, and gold-fire pools between Sol’s thighs. “Please.”

His legs shake. He is clawing at the bedsheets, searching for an anchor, that he finds in Yohan. “Sol,” Yohan’s voice reverberates hot against his neck. “Sol,” Yohan kisses his skin. And Sol cannot recognize himself in the noises that leave his lips anymore. “Sol, my love.”

Yohan holds him close as he climaxes—Sol cannot ever remember letting go like this, but he is gone in seconds, wholly lax from the bliss in Yohan’s arms. His arms and body tremble, he tries to kiss Yohan, yet accidentally knocks their noses together. Sol does not know why nor how he is coming so hard. *So much.* Still, Yohan holds him through it all with soft, hushed whispers and the kindness of his mouth on Sol’s lips. “I’m right here,” Yohan mumbles against him. “It is okay, Sol. I have you.” And Sol thinks he will never tire of hearing his name against the man’s lips.

Gods, he is feeling so much, has never felt this much—didn’t even know it was possible, until tonight.

Yohan wipes the tears away from his eyes and presses a soft kiss to Sol’s under eye, when Sol slowly comes down from his high, panting, his chest rising then falling like the tide, Yohan asks him, “Are you all right, my love?”

“I am, I—” Sol gasps as he tries to pull Yohan closer to him, even though they could not be any closer even if they tried. He finds himself crying. “I need you,” Sol’s mouth shakes around the words. “I need you—” His legs tremble around Yohan’s waist. It feels as though he has taken his heart out of his own chest and willingly handed it to Yohan—and Yohan could do as he pleases with it—yet all he does, is hand it back to Sol.

As he asks, “Are you certain?”

And Sol nods into Yohan’s shoulder. He has never been more certain of anything in his life. “I love you, Yohan.”

I’ve never been more certain in my life.

He hears Yohan's breaths come to a halt: a single tear that does not belong to him slips then falls onto Sol's cheek.

Yohan inhales, deep, raw—his breaths are hot puffs on Sol's collarbones. "Oh, *Sol*," the knight whispers the words, a kiss into Sol's skin. "Me too." Yohan wraps his arms around Sol's spine, as if he were a tree taking root around the earth. He snuffles. "I love you, too."

Sol takes his hand and kisses the back of the knight's knuckles; for a moment they merely look at each other in awe, as if they are both precious and rare to one another—*they are*—Yohan laughs.

Sol does, too. He takes, then leads Yohan's hand downward, between his legs once more. "Your fingers," he tells the knight, his voice soft, trying. "Could you—" Sol gulps. "Try it like before?"

"My love?" Yohan pushes into him. He presses his lips to Sol's, kisses Sol in slow, sensual ways. "Like this?" he asks.

And Sol's eyes flutter shut. "*Oh—*"

This time, Sol does not ask him to stop. His mind feels as though it is cotton, soft and gentle, and right. He sinks deeper into the pleasure, barely has space for anything in his mind but Yohan.

Yohan.

"Y-Yohan..."

"I'm here," Yohan whispers as he moves inside him and cuddles Sol near to his heart like before, his lips brush against Sol's forehead. "I have you."

Sol hiccups a moan as he trembles against Yohan, he has never let go like this before, and yet with Yohan by his side, he feels as though he could do anything. He hugs Yohan tighter, whimpers, and exhales. "F-Feels good—" Sol sighs the words into Yohan's mouth. He feels the man smile against his own lips.

"Can I put another inside?" Yohan asks Sol, as he observes him with his face flushed, too.

Sol nods. He blinks twice before he averts his gaze. "Please..." His skin burns with the prickling anticipation of Yohan's touch. As Yohan presses his fingers to Sol's entrance, he slowly pushes, until he is inside him again—and Sol heaves out a breath, it is true that this is bigger than what he is used to, but it feels *good* and Sol cannot get enough. Especially when the knight brushes up against a rather lovely spot inside him that finds Sol panting, moaning in an uncontrollable

manner, as Yohan hooks his fingers slightly upward then rubs Sol in circles. Sol tenses around his lover's hand, his world goes bright with pleasure and rapture finds him undone. He whimpers, trembling against Yohan. "O-Oh, *that's—*"

Yohan holds him through his littlest death and kisses him, soft and tender, all across his chest and body and all Sol thinks is that he would not mind staying in this moment forever, for never has he known such divine pleasure. "Yohan—*oh—* Gods, Yohan—" Sol gasps whilst he tries to catch his quivering breaths, he digs his fingers into the knight's back. And Yohan kisses him until Sol's lips are numb with his knight's sweet, effervescent warmth. "Yohan." Sol wraps his arms around Yohan's neck. "I love you so much."

Yohan presses his mouth to Sol's forehead. "I love you, too, my heart." His lips find Sol's eyelashes, then, the tip of Sol's nose. He kisses Sol's cheek, and the rest of his face, too. Until Sol is giggling, doing the same.

When they have both peppered each other in more kisses than they can count, Yohan's fingers leave Sol. "Sol, my love," he whispers as he pulls Sol in, closer to his chest. "My heart." Sol can feel his knight's pulse thump across his own rib cage again; it accelerates once Yohan speaks again. "Sol," he breathes, "do you want more?"

Though Sol still remains a tad nervous at the prospect of untangling this new unknown, tonight, there is nothing else he could want more than to lose himself in Yohan and have Yohan be lost in him. He reaches for Yohan's jaw and his face is flushed with the red of passion as he shows his knight a weak, tender smile. "Take me, Yohan," he says whilst he kisses the knight's lips once more. "*Please, I want you. I yearn to feel you, all of you.*"

Yohan's fingers stroke Sol's cheek softly. He shifts between Sol's legs, the tip of his cock is warm as he nudges Sol's entrance. Sol's breaths hitch, but Yohan coos him and strokes the back of his hair, the knight rests his hand atop the base of Sol's nape. "Breathe," he whispers. "Let go, my heart." And Sol does. He relishes in the way Yohan moves his hips and eases himself inside the tightness of his insides, like fingers sinking into honey.

Sol watches as Yohan grunts above him, his forehead sweat soaked, before the knight's cock is brushing up against that sweetest part of him again, and Sol moans as his eyes roll to the back of his head. "S-So much," he whines and grips at the sheets beneath him, his toes curl, his back arches. "So g-good—"

You make me feel so good, Yohan.

You always do.

“Sol.” A brief wave of worry washes over Yohan’s features; his jaw is tense, tight now, as he holds himself back from moving. “How do you feel?”

“I’m in love with you,” Sol speaks the confession past a fond smile, modest laughter soon lost to the skin over Yohan’s heart, he says it as if it is the most beautiful thing—and *it is*, Sol thinks. *It is.*

Yohan’s chuckle is light as brushes the hair out of Sol’s face. “I know,” he tells Sol. “It is the same for me. But, my heart,” he smiles, with his brows raised helplessly, in waiting, wanting. “Sol, how do you feel? May I move—”

“I’ve never felt so good,” Sol’s words are slurred and another giggle leaves him as he presses his lips to Yohan’s ear. “You feel exquisite, Yohan,” he tells his knight. “I don’t want to stop.”

He feels Yohan twitch inside him, Yohan tenses before his shoulders finally fall alongside the tension in his features. “I…” He heaves in a heavy breath. “I see.” Sol’s lover smiles back at him. “I’m glad.” He kisses Sol’s forehead once more, and lingers there for a moment. “My handsome man.”

Sol can do nothing but melt. They are close. So close. Yohan has seen inside his heart—despite the armor of Sol’s skin and the way its appearance does not reflect him, *despite everything*, Sol is embraced as a man by the knight—and *that, is a special thing*. Yohan thrusts his hips forward, he moves inside him and a tear slips down the side of Sol’s cheek. He buries his face into his lover’s chest, *into his scent*, and a moan escapes him.

Yohan has seen inside his soul.

Yohan has looked at him—truly looked.

Yohan has fallen for him.

And they are in love.

And, Gods, how right it all feels.

When Yohan tenses and spills inside him, Sol grasps at his lover’s arms and cries out with a smile etched into his lips; he hopes that this will last.

* * *

Early in the morning, when the sun has barely touched Yohan's kingdom, the sun rises to a pale blue that paints the inside of the cottage walls in ephemeral skylight.

Yohan shifts in the bed and the sudden movement wakes Sol. "Yohan?" Sol calls. "W-Where are you going?"

"The King still wants me to attend my duties as one of his right hand men. I apologize, my love." He squeezes Sol's hand. "I must leave soon, but if you wish it so, I can return to you at midday?"

Sol leans in to kiss his beloved's cheek. "Come back if you have time."

And Yohan pulls Sol in close, until he towers over him just like last night. "How do you feel?" Yohan reaches for the edges of Sol's jaw.

And Sol leans into his cradled touch. He giggles. "I feel amazing. Last night was..." Sol's fingers find Yohan's face in turn, he cannot remember ever smiling so much that his face hurts, and yet, it is happening now. He brushes Yohan's lips with his fingertips. "Words cannot explain how you made me feel, Yohan. But, perhaps, this..." Sol's voice trails off, he shuts his eyes then concentrates the flow of his magic within his blood, and lets Yohan receive his feelings. It is brief, yet it seems Yohan does understand, for soon the knight is all laughter and grins, *too*, as he embraces Sol they touch, and love, and relish in the joy of knowing each other. They kiss beneath the lilac covers.

They kiss.

They kiss, until it is time for the knight to depart. Yohan tucks Sol into bed again, leaves him with one final peck against his forehead—Sol loves him and loves loving him, he thinks about Yohan and his ever sweetest words as he falls back into his slumber. Sol wakes not long after, in a world that is his yet isn't, a place that is both everything and nothing melted together in one big abysmal pot. Sol faces a creature whose sole eye is wide and observant, bright, red as it peers into his gaze.

"*You've chosen change,*" the eye says, its voice rings throughout the air and yet it does not speak with a mouth: the creature's tone is a mixture of every voice Sol has ever heard in his life. *The good ones, and the bad.*

Sol's throat tightens, he looks up as the creature flaps its dark feathered wings. He brings his arms over his chest and sews his lips into a thinning line.

“I’ve chosen to be true to myself, nothing has changed,” Sol tells the strange, raven monster.

And the thing’s voice warps into that of Sol’s old dormmates—into the ones Sol feared would judge him the most for failing to conform. *“But we don’t understand—why throw it all away?”* The creature wisps and fades out then materializes into existence again as it flies in circles around Sol. The flapping of its wings are loud beside Sol’s ears; the fog rises around them. *“You were a prodigy, Solange. Why make your life that much harder, so much more complicated, when you could have it all?”*

“Stop calling me that! I *didn’t* have it all.” Sol’s hands shake yet still turn into fists by his sides. “And I never would have.” He motions to the world around them, swipes at an invisible struggle in the air. “I felt miserable, it was more complicated to live in Solange’s shell than to be free.”

The voice twists into an ugly, rageful thing. *“But we will never understand! To us, you will always be Solange!”*

“That’s fine.” Sol smiles at the creature then reaches out to pet its ruffled feathers. “I don’t need you to understand.” He leans in, and he wraps his arms around the creature that he holds without hate. “I love the world now—even if it does not ever embrace nor welcome me fully—it feels so good to be myself.” *To finally exist*, Sol thinks. His laughter is light as he releases the creature, he joins his hands together behind his back then leans forward in glee. “I do not think I could ever hate it again, you see.”

At the height of his confession, the world falls beneath Sol’s feet—until Sol is floating beside the strange, ocular bird, unable to tell which is up nor down. *“You’ve disappointed everyone,”* the creature tells Sol.

And Sol grins. “I know.”

“You are a failure.”

He laughs again. “Ah, yes, maybe so.”

“Have you no shame, Sol?”

“Perhaps,” now, Sol kisses the ugly thing with his eyes fluttered shut, “if there was something to be ashamed about.”

The creature bats its wings in disgust, it only ceases once it is away from Sol, where it warps into the man Sol feared to see for years. “And me?” — asks. “Do you not hate me, Solange? I am a part of this world you so claim to love.” —

chuckles in the way that had made Sol's skin crawl, when Sol was a mere student, who'd sworn to trust his mentor. "Do you forgive me, Solange?"

"No," Sol whispers as his smile grows bittersweet, "I don't forgive you." He shakes his head, thinks, *I could never*. "But you are not the world; you don't matter to me anymore," Sol hopes that, one day, if he says it enough times this will become truth.

The strong stink of sulfur fills the air. Shadows rise from below and wrap around Sol's figure until they have engulfed him inside an odd, blackened egg.

Sol gasps—his throat wheezes. And he opens his eyes.

* * *

Later in the morning, Sol wakes to birdsong. Sunlight flitters through the window and lays on his head of hair in a warm caress. The aroma of pancakes and strawberry jam are wafting through the old cottage. "Yohan?" Sol calls, as he turns his head atop his pillow in the direction of the kitchen. Yet, it is not with the sight of the knight that he is met, but a handwritten note left beside a plate of what seems to be breakfast.

Within his bed, Sol stretches his arms to the ceiling, he watches as the sunlight catches on his skin. He is tired, he cannot recall ever sleeping so heavily, like a rock, a dying stallion. It feels as though he had a long dream—though, what that dream was, Sol cannot remember.

He turns, then shifts again beneath his sheets. Sol thinks back to yesternight, to Yohan's big, strong hands traversing every place across his body.

To the way they made love.

The young apothecary brings his palms to his face, he lets out a small, subtle scream.

It finally happened, he thinks as he peers through his fingertips at the room before him and the sight of his first morning here. "I can't believe we actually..." *Did it*, Sol thinks.

And it was fine, most importantly, is the lesson Sol takes from it all as his eyes widen slightly, *I'm fine*.

Yohan treated him with such kindness.

There was nothing to fear.

Sol brings a hand to his heart that warms with memories of last night. A lovesick grin tugs at his lips. “Ah...” Sol sighs. “Yohan was so nice to me.” Sol buries his face into his pillow and lets out another whine. “Gods, he is so...” *Handsome? Gentle? Kind? Perfect?* All sorts of words ripple through Sol’s heart and mind, yet he cannot simply decide on one.

“Yohan,” Sol hums. “He’s... Yohan, I guess,” Sol eventually mumbles before he turns his head again that still rests against the soft, plush pillow. He stares out at the breakfast which is still steaming slightly on the little round wood table. Sol wonders if Yohan came back in here at some point to cook when he was still fast asleep, or if he did this before departing.

In either case, Sol doesn’t know what he did in his life to deserve such a man as his beloved, but he certainly vows to cherish him now that he is here.

Although there is still a prickle of worry in his heart about things going direly wrong, now that Sol cannot rely on the many certitudes his past visions brought him, it is so painfully easy for him to imagine a future by Yohan’s side—one where the knight is nothing but loving to him; *Sol doesn’t feel as though he needs the reassurance anymore.*

Finally, after another moment of laying down in reminiscence, he huffs then pushes himself up away from the bed. Sol wraps a blanket around his naked self. For a minute, he sits on the mattress’ edge. His legs still shake a tad from when Yohan had thrust up against his thighs, and Sol’s face reddens as he remembers what it felt like when his beloved was inside him like so. He bites into his lip, then realizes, *how much he wants to do it again.*

But all that will have to wait, for Sol has work to do. And a meal to devour!

“All right,” Sol rises to his feet with a huff as he stretches his legs again, whilst he makes for the quaint little table in the kitchen. He takes a seat before the pancakes decorated with a crown of fresh fruit. There is a note beside them that reads, ‘*My love, I cannot wait to kiss you again.*’ Sol grins, warmth swells inside his heart. “Me, too,” he whispers. “My heart.”

Sol scarfs down the breakfast; everything is delicious, Sol will have to ask him about the recipe later, Yohan is quite the cook.

Sol blinks. In the corner of his eye, a nearby pot of tea catches his attention—oddly, Sol realizes it is still smoking, with the aid of magic. “Hm...” He squints, and tilts his head as he stares at the pot: it seems the Old King’s magic isn’t the only sort his beloved knight can wield. “What fun,” Sol smirks with a content sigh as he pours himself a cup.

If Yohan’s personal affinity for the magical world allows him to keep things warm, opening a tearoom in his name is quite fitting indeed.

Sol drinks. And the brew is sweet, full of the savors of this land, and splendidly warm like a fireplace on a cold winter’s evening. Sol can taste raspberries in there, somewhere, the tea soothes him and wakes him all the same. “Delicious.” Sol stares down the knight’s tea in awe, the layered flavors and perfectly balanced aroma are the furthest from a blend one could have crafted overnight; *Yohan must’ve put a lot of thought into the brew.*

As Sol finishes the comforting drink, he cannot help but grin. He is excited for the future—for *their future*—and what it may hold. He is certain Yohan will be a great solace to wandering travelers, just like the knight had wished: if all of his menu turns out to be like the breakfast he left behind today, Sol has no doubt that anyone in his tearoom will create fond memories there.

It is like Sol has been thrust into another life, even though it is still his, but first... before anything, there is one thing he must do.

Sol eyes his satchel with a huff. *What the stars won’t have in store for them, on the other hand, is another life if he can help it...* Out from his bag, Sol grasps a few herbs that were slipped inside a small pocket. He quickly grinds them into a potion he’d already prepared in advance, then downs it without hesitation; as much as he enjoyed the moment he’d shared with Yohan yesterday, he would rather it not follow him for the nine months to come.

The potion burns his throat ever so slightly, however it is over in an instant, and Sol’s worries are soon washed away alongside the odd heat. Sol drags his feet over to the bathroom to splash water across his face.

Before the sink, he stands and stares at himself inside the mirror. His mind had been so peaceful when he’d yet to peer at his reflection—yet, now, his heart aches anew. *I can’t take it anymore*, Sol thinks as a rising pressure wells inside his throat, and the thickening air makes it hard to breathe. He chokes on the feeling.

Sol paces back to his satchel in the living room, from which he grabs a dagger that he holds close to his heart.

I can't do this anymore, not for another horrid day, he thinks as he returns to the mirror, his face lit by soft daylight and shadow, Sol grabs hold of the back of his hair in a makeshift ponytail. And cuts. "Oh."

Sol's hair falls to the ground like old snake skin, he reaches for the mirror with an open palm, then stares at himself for the first time. "It's me," he whispers in an awestruck tone. He cannot look away. His lips are agape. He didn't think he could ever be satisfied with... *this. Just a haircut. Just his face.*

Though it does not change everything, he is relieved to know Yohan was right, *he is handsome. It turns out, he can be when he tries. Especially now.* Sol loves the way his chestnut strands frame his face now, and bring out every feature that makes him feel at home inside himself.

When Sol gets dressed for the day, for once, his attention lingers on his reflection instead of looking away. "Ah..." Sol laughs, as his chest blooms with the warmth of knowing *he is here*; he wipes a tear of joy away from his eye, "So, that's what it feels like?" To think it took him so long to finally see himself, to be born, *what a strange journey this all has been.*

As Sol strides out the little cottage's front door, the bell rings behind him amid the hot summer air; cicadas sing inside the trees.

That morning, Solange becomes a ghost.

* * *

Sol works alone until it is thirty minutes before noon, and Celestina arrives in a rush—contrary to last night, Sol does not pack his belongings when he leaves the King's bedroom, for it won't be too long until his midday break comes to an end.

Celestina is profusely apologizing to him with her hands crossed together before her waist. "Forgive my tardiness, Sol! I didn't mean to make you wait, b-but we've a birth at the castle—it was *Her Highness's* child! I was required to watch over the Princess until her condition stabilized. S-So—"

“It’s fine, really.” Sol waves her apology away. “No harm done. You already instructed me yesterday on what the next few steps would entail, before we turned in. Thanks to your foresightedness I was able to continue that work—ah, and I also used any remaining ingredients to craft a few more painkillers for His Majesty in case he might be in need of them down the line, don’t worry.” He smiles at her. “I hope everything went well for you. Assisting with a birth sounds...” Sol hooks an arm around the back of his neck and gulps, “intense.”

To this, Celestina merely shrugs. “I like it.” A proud grin washes over her lips. “It’s nice, to see new life come into the world. Though,” Celestina huffs in relief as she rests her hands against her hips, “I agree, this time around, knowing Her Highness’s life was on the line definitely made the whole ordeal rather stressful.” She pauses. “N-Not that I didn’t believe in my abilities! But...” Celestina wipes the sweat away from her brow, she shuts her eyes then brings a palm to her chest. “Thankfully, everything was in order.”

Sol can’t help but admire his workfellow’s ability to remain serene when tending to royalty—all this outlandish quest has made Sol want to do, is run. The feeling of having an entire Kingdom’s future in his hands is one he does not think he was made for, with the most perilous stakes he wishes to encounter being the accidental burning of rare ingredients in his cauldron back home.

“Anywho.” Celestina clears her throat, she stares at him again; she is silent as her eyes trace Sol’s face. “You cut it.”

“W-Well...” As he thinks back to the earlier morning, Sol cannot help but run a hand through his hair, the length feels perfect pinched between his fingers. “I’ve been wanting to for a while.”

“It suits you.” Celestina smiles at him. “You look...” she pauses, “handsome.” She stops herself again, her face flushing a dark pink. “S-Sorry! Hope that’s not a weird thing to say when you’re a—”

“Actually, Celestina—” Sol’s voice cracks under the pressure of his nerves. “I’m not really a woman,” he squeezes at his own elbow, “rather, I’m not one at all. I...” Sol stares at his feet, in all honesty he’s not sure why he’s telling her all this, but he has a feeling she would understand. “I’m just a man, and people often misunderstand, and it’s hard to correct them because then they ask questions I might not want to deal with and it’s a hassle and—”

He’s out of breath.

He doesn't know what he's saying.

He can barely stand to look Celestina in the eye. Sol's ears ring. Although this may have started out decently, Sol wonders if his colleague will even take his blurted, fumbled words in serious.

She is the first person Sol has told who isn't Yohan, or in the presence of Yohan—Sol didn't think it would be this hard.

Before he can find any more words to make himself feel like a complete court jester, however, Celestina rests a reassuring hand against Sol's shoulder. "I won't ask you any questions, don't worry, Sol," she tells him—the warmth of her palm is a welcome respite from the nerves that had been eating away at his heart, "thank you for telling me."

Sol gathers the courage within himself to tilt his head, to look at her. "I'm... looking forward to working together again with you today. It's been nice." He grins, shyly. "I've learned much about healing thanks to you in a mere few hours, I'm sure I'll be a better apothecary for it, so thank you."

There is a silence, until Celestina barks out a laugh. "Look at us!" She pats Sol on the back. "Aren't we being precious *this* early in the day!" Celestina pulls away from him then braces herself to step inside the King's room, to take over Sol's duties.

Before leaving, however, she looks to Sol from over her shoulder. "I'll see you soon, Sol! Enjoy your break—be safe!"

And Sol nods back. "You, too!" He waves as he watches her leave. "Be safe..."

When Celestina disappears inside the bedroom, and Sol is on the verge of stepping out the King's manor, Sol pauses before the painting that had caught his eye yesternight and now again.

Now that he is seeing it better in broad daylight, it appears to be a family portrait of the Old King, his wife and children—a strange aura envelops the man in the painting, shadows seem to move from within, as if telling the viewer to look away. *Leave.* Sol thinks back to the legends of the Old King, he stares at the King's son who was famously lost to the war, then to his wife who fell to disease. And as for the Old King's daughter, well... Sol does not know. It is unclear whatever became of her after the Old King summoned magic of the cruelest kind, and made a deal with forces that bound his kingdom to an oath they did not want, even 'til this day.

The man wanted power, Sol thinks as he stares up to the ancient portrait that towers over him with its sinister presence—*he wanted power, and he acquired too much of it*.

Eventually, Sol turns away from the portrait and walks outside the manor, into the sunlight again. The face of the Old King's daughter comes to mind, pale with opaline eyes, her ash blonde hair fell in waves across her shoulders; *there was something otherworldly about her, too*. Sol wishes he knew more about this Kingdom's history, not many dare to ask nor write about it: It is likely all knowledge regarding the Old King will come to disappear one day, faster than any other archive out there as the generations pass. Even amid his studies, Sol met more than a handful of peers who still thought of the Old King and his Cursed Riders more folkloric legend than truth.

"Maybe I could write about these lands..." Sol sighs as his head hangs low. *Who knows*. Cicada song grows louder amid the damp, summer heat. Sol's mind veers back to his conversation with Celestina, and then to Yohan, and to the odd ways in which this day has progressed—so much has changed, yet everything is the same. Still, Sol feels different as he makes his way back to the cottage, like he is present in the world for once. Even the air tastes fresher as he stops to laugh and smell the flowers in the gardens and the fields. Sol wonders if Yohan has made it back yet, or, if he will be the first one there.

He presses his fingertips deftly against the cottage's wooden door, only to find that it is locked. "Ah, I suppose I was first, then," Sol mumbles under his breath whilst he grabs his key from his coat's pocket. He unlocks the door that creaks open, slow as the snailbeds in the lazy noon grass, as the light bleeds into the kitchen; the cottage is as he left it.

In the corner of his eye, Sol notices the tea Yohan made for him this morning is still steaming, perfectly preserved. He figures having another serving certainly wouldn't hurt. Sol grins. *He did quite like the brew, after all*.

As Sol pours then sips at the table, on his newly acquired teacup, he looks to the outside world—past the window at the birds flying in the trees, amongst each other in a fleeting aeriform dance. He likes the silence, but it is a bit much.

In search of a brief distraction, Sol grabs a book from a nearby shelf, then starts to read. At first, Sol expects it to be some sort of text related to gardening. Yet, to his surprise, the words on the page describe two men: one of whom is

sucking on his lover's nipples, whilst his lover is pliant, more than eager to receive. Sol's eyes widen as he reads the words, *Please, Kaiser, don't stop—it's so good!* And, *Quiet, Elwood, you'll wake His Highness if you moan any louder!* He ends up flying through the chapter faster than he likes to admit, his mouth slightly agape, his face is warm with arousal, *intrigue*. Sol was never one for picking up these sorts of books, having only stuck to thick tomes which taught him a great deal about medicine, brewing potions and magics. *Still, Sol can't help but wonder now...*

"Does it really... feel *that* good?" Sol mumbles aloud with a frown as he rereads a few lines from the passage, where one of the men is dragging his tongue across supple pink flesh and the other is panting, begging him for more. It is brief and he does not mean to, however, Sol pictures Yohan doing these exact same things to him.

His face warms.

He quickly shakes the idea away, his fingers tensing against thick leather bindings as he peers down to his own chest. Sol sighs, "But how could I ever..." With a shake of his head, he pushes the thought and the book away.

For now.

He takes another sip of his tea.

Seconds later, once Sol nears the end of his cup, there is a knock at the door.

Sol stumbles as he rises, jittery on his feet with excitement of the purest kind—*his love for the knight*. "Yohan!" Sol exclaims. He yanks the door open in an odd, needless rush and finds his lover standing there with a merry grin on his face. "Greetings."

Yohan's eyes widen. The knight's lips are shapen in an *oh* as he gazes upon Sol. "Sol, you—" Yohan looks and sounds surprised *enough* for a worried pang to clasp around Sol's heart.

"Do you not like it?" Sol doesn't mean to sound so dejected nor miserable, but through and through these recent, atypical times, Sol has grown inept at hiding his feelings before his darling knight.

Yohan's brows arch upward in a pained manner, as if saddened by Sol's conclusion. He takes Sol into his arms then, with a hand cupping the crown of his head, Yohan strokes his hair. And Sol leans into the light touch. "No, my heart, I do," Yohan tells him. "It suits you." As they pull away, Yohan's palm finds

Sol's jaw yet again. He smiles. "You're very handsome. You've always been to me." For the very first time, Sol believes him.

The two step inside the cottage together—Sol is leaning in and hugging Yohan from the side, and Yohan reaching for Sol's nimble fingers, neither of them can keep their hands off each other.

But when Yohan tilts his head, the knight seems to catch a glimpse of the book Sol had been reading, which remains atop the kitchen table. He pauses. "Oh, sorry, did I interrupt you in the middle of a read?"

Sol recalls the words he'd accidentally stumbled upon between those pages, and his head disappears into his shoulders. "Not exactly..." His face warms as the fantasy of Yohan playfully biting his chest lingers in his mind.

"Was it good?"

Sol yelps, then jumps on the spot. "W-Was *what* good?" *Could Yohan tell from a simple look that he'd been thinking about—*

"The book."

"Ah." Sol has rarely felt quite so awkward in his life. "Yes. Yes, of course." He wants to bury himself between the tulip fields and the forest near the cottage, where at least the plants there won't judge him, and he would need not explain. "It was," Sol hooks a palm around the back of his neck, "*interesting*, I suppose. But—" Sol clears his throat with a fist close to his lips. "Why don't I tell you about this a-after we've eaten, maybe?"

Yohan reaches for Sol's hand again, his smile is as warm as the summer light. "As long as you're all right, my love, you don't need to explain." The tension in Sol's shoulders fade; for even as little as he shares, it seems the knight has gotten quite good at reading him, too. "Would beef stew sound good to you?" Yohan asks him with a hum, before he turns, then presses a soft kiss into Sol's temple.

Sol rests his head against the knight's shoulder. He shuts his eyes. *It is peaceful here. So peaceful. He can still hear the birds singing.* Yohan runs a gentle hand down his neck. And Sol wonders why he even worried in the first place as he leans into him. "That sounds perfect."

They get to work.

As Yohan handles the meat and Sol tasks himself with chopping their vegetables, Sol finds himself humming a faraway tune—that is, until he clears his

throat. "I thought your brew was amazing, by the way." Sol giggles. "I may be a tad biased, but I swear, it truly was one of the best I've ever tasted!"

Yohan straightens up with light pink blush dusting his features. "Ah?" He sounds flustered, surprisingly. "Thank you... I tried something new." He sighs as his shoulders drop and he tilts his head to rest it beside Sol's. "I admit, I was worried it may have been too fruity, but you'd mentioned liking this sort of taste during our travels, so I'd wanted to try..."

Had he? Sol blinks—if he'd spoken about it, then it was likely quite off-handedly in passing. "I'm surprised you remembered." He laughs. "Even I forget, sometimes."

The knight nods as he smiles again brightly. "Well, I admit, I had an ulterior motive—during our travels, I kept pondering about how I'd wanted to make something you'd enjoy as thanks, once we'd arrive at the palace. I can't say your tastes weren't in the back of my mind." He huffs, content. "In either case, there were a few herbs in this kitchen I'd read about in some old cookbooks, but never used before." He grabs a pot and begins to boil water. "I'm glad you enjoyed it."

Sol finds Yohan's passion for creating recipes endearing, just like his brews, his words warm Sol's heart as he listens to his lover talk. "Of course, I did," Sol huffs as he spills the vegetables into the water once it begins to boil. He pauses to look at Yohan. "You're really sweet, you know that?"

Yohan's eyes widen, ever so slightly. "I merely..." He reaches for Sol's hand again, his fingertips brush past Sol's knuckles. "I want to cherish you properly," he whispers, with his head lowered, his attention now focused on their fingers intertwined.

"And you do," Sol tells him as he rests their heads together, his voice is quiet, almost overtaken by the sound of the water which bubbles before them. "You do."

Yohan turns then presses another kiss into his temple; Sol can feel him smiling against his skin.

A minute passes in which they simply lean into each other, their body heats merging into one, until Sol sighs. "More importantly, I didn't realize your affinity for magic extended further than the Old King's magic."

"Ah. That?" Yohan's laughter is awkward. "It's just the one, truly." He pulls away. "It didn't feel worth the mention."

“How long does it last?”

As the knight adds the meat to the broth, he shrugs, then washes the blood from his hands. “A day or so.”

“A day!” Sol perks up and tilts his head in great interest—for a moment, he forgets himself, and that he is meant to be cooking. “Even if that’s the only magic you’ve mastered, rare are the few who can heat something up for *that* long! Actually...” Sol frowns as he ponders on the matter. “You might just be the first one I’ve ever met!”

“I... I see.” Yohan hooks a hand around the back of his neck, his face flushing red in ways that finds Sol’s heart beating a tad faster. “What about you?” Yohan asks. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you use magic with your own flair, despite having studied it for so long, as you mentioned during our travels— were you not touched by a particular Gift and merely interested by the Arts? Though, I know you’re well capable of sharing your heart with another, thanks to your *bloodline’s*—”

Sol pours the one remaining slab of the meat into a pan that he slams atop the burner. “The Gift touched me, yes, and it still does.” He huffs, from one of the small hessian sacks hanging from the ceiling, Sol grabs a compact vial containing amber liquids which warm his hands from the inside. The young apothecary pops the lid open then sprinkles it beneath the pan.

The underside swiftly catches fire, which remains alight thanks to the burner’s magical properties. “In short,” Sol clicks his tongue, “I have not used my Gift in a while.” He shuts the vial and places it back into the sack with another huff. It’d been years since he last cooked using such convenient tools, they cost a small fortune and Sol would rather keep most of his life’s savings if he can help it.

“I don’t know how my Gift might react,” Sol admits, after another short pause. His eyes are fixated on the firelight, the flames reflect pomegranate shade against his pale ivory gaze. “Until recently”—*and ever since I ran away*—“my Gift felt... unstable.”

Yohan mirrors Sol’s movements as he approaches the stove in turn, the knight tasks himself with watching the broth. “*Until recently*, you say...” The words linger on Yohan’s. “That means, it doesn’t anymore?”

Sol’s shoulders tense. “W-Well...”

It is true that throughout these past six years, Sol felt as if trying *anything* with his Gift, could very well have hurt himself, or injured the others around him gravely: magic reacts to emotions, after all.

And Sol was hardly able to keep his in check.

He was angry. He was burning. All he wanted was to disappear, to forget himself, it was no state of mind fit for a practicing mage. “That might be true,” Sol mutters. “But... it’s been so long now. I’m scarcely sure of what my magic would even look like anymore.” Sol’s fingers tremble against the pan’s handle. *What if it’s changed too much? What if I’ve changed too much? “I’m scared,”* he thinks, before he realizes he’s said it out loud.

“What of?” Yohan asks.

“What if my Gift does not obey me anymore?”

The knight sighs. “Sol,” he whispers. “Perhaps, it may be odd for me to say this, considering I’m no mage myself, however—” Yohan rests a gentle, comforting palm to Sol’s back. “Your Gift is a part of you, Sol—granted, it may be different now, but at the end of everything it can only change and grow alongside you, I don’t think it is anything to fear. It is yours, and yours alone.”

Sol stares down to his hands as he considers Yohan’s words. He cannot quite explain why, yet it feels as though he has been asleep for so long. And he is only waking now. “Maybe...”

The sounds of their life fill the kitchen’s air anew. The sizzling of oil across the pan, the water that simmers around its contents and bubbles as it boils.

Sol and Yohan finish with cooking their meal before they both help themselves to a hefty soup bowl each. “Has His Majesty shown good promise of recovery?” Yohan asks, from the opposite end of the kitchen table.

Sol briefly glances upward from his broth to stare at the knight’s lips; they are parted softly as he’d readied himself to swallow a round, carrot piece trapped inside the hollow of his wooden spoon. “He’ll be fine,” Sol eventually says as he eats. “He’s in good hands! Celestina is talented, really, it’s not often that I’ve met someone like her. Sometimes, she reminds me of...” Sol’s voice trails off.

“Sol?” Yohan perks up.

“Just an old classmate.” Sol shakes his head. “Never mind.” It’s difficult *not to* think about such a big piece of his life, but Sol would still rather avoid it—for now. It still hurts.

There is a small silence between them. Outside, the hooves of horses can be heard thumping against grass. “How about some bread to go with the broth, my love?” Yohan offers as he reaches for Sol’s palm then rests his hand atop Sol’s knuckles.

Sol relaxes beneath him. “That’s not a bad idea.” He shows the knight a grin. “Why not!”

And Yohan rises from his seat. “I’ll go cut some up for us.” As he does, Sol watches the knight’s back while he works, his strong forearms tense with each new slice created. None of his movements are off, not even slightly—Yohan has perfected the art of controlling his body and strength, and Sol finds something irresistible in that.

Yohan returns to the table with the bread in hand, an earnest smile across his lips, Sol’s chest warms. He holds so much love for the man, he isn’t quite sure what to do with himself. But he leans in, across the old wood and their meal, and Sol grasps Yohan’s hand, twines their fingers together then kisses his beloved briefly.

Yohan kisses back, soft like velvet and honey. And Sol hopes, *wishes* every remaining day in their lives will be *like this*.

By the end of their meal, Yohan offers to do the dishes; although Sol offers to aid him, the knight merely waves him off. “Please, I insist. You’re a guest here, and a very valuable one at that, too—I’m happy to do them for you.”

Yet as he stares at his beloved’s back again whilst he gets to work, Sol finds he simply cannot stay away nor still—he rises from his seat, he wraps his arms around the knight’s middle, then embraces Yohan from behind. “I’ll work hard so we can leave soon, so he can free you,” he whispers. “I promise.”

* * *

The week is long and the nights longer: in the end, the days fly by in a dazed flurry, all blurring into one another—*crafting medicine, studying texts gifted to him by Celestina, passing out the moment Sol’s head hits the pillow*—it is a tiring routine but a satisfying one nonetheless.

Sol couldn't remember what it'd been like to learn so many new things in so little time at once. Until now, where his mind eats up the knowledge like a great delicacy, as every morning he rises to the promise of uncovering more mysteries about the worlds around him. *He had missed this*, Sol realizes, he will forever be a student at heart.

The book from the cottage bookshelf has completely slipped his mind, and many sunrises pass without talk of its contents—that is, until this quiet weekend, where Sol returns to the memory once he sees hardbound leather in the corner of his eye, as he cuddles Yohan across his bed.

"My love?" Yohan reaches for him and cups his jaw with a delicate touch.

Sol tenses at the touch, for the fantasy of having Yohan's lips on his chest only grows in his mind that spirals into pure wanting.

"Your posture changed, suddenly," Yohan mumbles, as he pulls away in slight worry, his tone is still a tad lethargic, a remnant of the nap they took together earlier. "Shall we stop? What is—"

"N-Nothing!" Sol blurts before he averts his gaze to cotton sheets and their creases. "It's... nothing." Or so he wants to say. But lying to Yohan feels... *wrong*. Not to mention Sol honestly sort of wants to tell him out of sheer curiosity on how the knight would react. "Actually, Yohan..." Sol clears his throat. With a sigh, and his head hung low, Sol rises to his feet. He strides toward the bookcase. He grabs the book, before he brings it back onto the bed. Sol opens the leather bindings to the page he'd creased a few weeks ago.

Then, he hands the book to Yohan.

"It got me... curious," Sol tells his knight, who begins to read the words on the page in silence.

A silence, that feels both liberating and daunting all the same.

It takes a few moments, in which Yohan merely takes the book's contents in, before an expression of surprise grows across the knight's features. Yohan raises a brow at Sol, then asks, "Would you like to try?"

Yes, Sol would.

It has been on his mind.

"A little, but... I worry I will hate it." Nervous apprehension weaves itself between Sol's tightening shoulders. "Or that it will be strange, or a waste of time."

Yohan closes the book. "If you aren't certain, we don't have to do anything."

"I..." Sol makes fists into his beloved's tunic, and as Yohan rests an encouraging hand against his elbow, Sol urges him closer toward his neck. He can feel Yohan's breaths ghost peppered warmth against his skin as he holds onto the knight like a lifeline. "B-But I want to," Sol mumbles, so quiet, that even the outside birdsong muted by the windowpane is louder. "But it's— *I*..." Sol sighs. "I can't stand that part of myself, *still*, it seems as though it could be very... pleasurable." Sol gulps, meek and shy, before he adds, "P-Possibly."

At Sol's dilemma, the knight furrows his brows. "Have you tried it alone?"

"No—*absolutely not*." Sol buries his face into Yohan's chest anew. "I don't want to touch myself there."

"Yet, you would like me to?"

"Maybe...if I close my eyes while you touch me, I could forget what I look like and only feel your..." Sol's voice trails off as he looks to Yohan for guidance.

The knight hums. "I suppose that does make sense." He pauses, then meets Sol's gaze again. "But, Sol, are you... certain?" He reaches for Sol's hands then thumbs softly at his knuckles. "We do not have to do this today, or even this year. We can put this off, if you aren't certain of—"

"I'm sure." Sol wraps his arms around Yohan's shoulders. "D-Don't worry..." A bashful flush of warmth creeps up his neck, he takes a deep breath. "It's merely...a little embarrassing to admit."

He feels the knight smile against him. "Ah, I see." Yohan's big, strong hands find his waist. "In that case..." He urges Sol onto his back. "Close your eyes."

And Sol does exactly that. Sandwiched between his knight and the mattress, Sol concentrates on the heat of Yohan's palms slipping up his shirt, he shivers, then bites into his lower lip.

"Feel good?" Yohan breathes the words against his neck. His hands are rested flat against Sol's ribcage now, his thumbs skirting right under Sol's chest. "My handsome man." He presses a kiss to the underside of Sol's jaw.

A small yet audible moan escapes Sol's lips—his back arches off the mattress ever so slightly but he nods, as his eyes remain shut, his arms fall to the sides of his face. "Yohan." Sol gasps as Yohan takes Sol's lips with his own. "L-Love you."

The kiss they share is long, loving, slow as Yohan's thumbs tentatively brush up against Sol's nipples. The knight lowers his voice to a growl. "I love you, too,

my heart,” the words resonate against Sol’s insides and finds him squirming.

Sol’s legs shake around Yohan’s waist, his breaths hitch; it is difficult for his body to do anything other than relax, yield to his beloved, and— *Ah*, he thinks as Yohan continues to touch him so tenderly. *So, it does feel good.*

“More?” Yohan asks whilst he rubs gentle circles into Sol’s sensitive skin, an act that has Sol’s sex throbbing with heat. Sol cannot believe how wet he is getting merely from this, but he has soaked his breeches and across his thighs, too.

“Yes, *please*—” Sol gasps and whimpers, and soon Yohan is pulling his shirt off, so that his chest is bared. Sol scarcely has time to feel the room’s subtle chill before Yohan is kissing him, leaving gentle lovebites across his chest. “Oh, *Yohan*. G-Gods.”

The knight’s hands settle against his ribcage again and hold him in place. As he continues to tower over him, between Sol’s legs, Sol can feel the warmth of Yohan’s erection through his trousers. Sol wraps his arms around his lover’s shoulders once more and holds him, closest. “Feels good,” Sol mumbles. And then, Yohan is sucking. His teeth graze Sol’s nipples ever so slightly, he uses his free hand to tease whatever parts of Sol’s chest aren’t in his mouth.

“Ah, t-that’s—” Sol hisses; he isn’t sure what he is trying to say when the words leave his lips...*surely some expression of pleasure*...but the words are lost to him now for his mind spins with a dizzying heat.

His arousal is like fire, burning hot and bright in his guts, he didn’t know sex could feel like this—so hungry, so desperate yet vulnerable and *good*.

He wonders how long they do this for—*time does not exist anymore*, Yohan has pulled him into a realm of pleasure for Gods only know how long and Sol loses himself, unguarded, to his knight’s gentle soft caresses—when he tilts his head to look away and briefly opens his eyes, Sol notices the sunlight in the room has shifted in comparison to where it was before. “Yohan,” he mumbles, his knees still trembling around the knight’s waist. A heavy pool of overwhelm and weighted heat has settled in his belly; and Sol aches for relief. “Can I touch myself?”

At his request, Yohan smiles against Sol’s skin. He pulls away to brush the hair out of Sol’s eyes. “Of course,” he whispers, his hand lingering in Sol’s dark

chestnut strands as he leans forward; the knight presses a soft, tender kiss into Sol's forehead. "My love."

Sol reaches downward, his fingers tremble with eager hesitance—*still*, as Yohan continues to suckle and pinch at his nipples, Sol's hand slips past his breeches, down between his legs. "Gods, *Yohan*," Sol rubs his cock in soft, circular motions. "It feels s-so..." A heavy exhale leaves his lips. "So, *good*." It has been a while since he has done this to himself, the cool of his fingers pressing down against his swollen heat is an intoxicating feeling—it is not long before Sol is tensing, whimpering beneath his knight.

"Sol, come here," Yohan whispers as he pulls him close, into his chest and Sol grasps onto the front of Yohan's tunic with bunched quivering fists. The knight holds Sol through his climax then whispers sweet nothings into his ear, and Sol may as well be in paradise for this is bliss. As he slowly comes down from his high, panting, his lips partly open—Yohan chuckles and kisses him again. "That was fast."

"I—" Sol raises his brows in a show of helplessness as he buries his face into the knight's shoulder. "Can you blame me?" he mumbles with a groan. "You got me very worked up."

Yohan laughs again, the sound of his voice is light as a flitter of sunlight hits both their ankles, he continues to stroke the crown of Sol's head. "I suppose I did." A warm smile tugs at his lips as the two of them pull away; both their eyes are lidded, they look at each other in silent fondness, *admiration*.

Sol finds himself forgetting that he is still half in the nude, though once he comes back to himself, he quickly pulls his shirt down over his chest then turns his head away from Yohan's gaze. "Sorry..."

"What for?" the knight asks. From above him, Yohan threads their fingers together, his face is worn with the tightness of unease. "What's wrong, my love? Was it not pleasurable?"

"No, it was. But I..." Sol presses his lips together. And shame pulls at his gut. He still can't bring himself to look at Yohan. "You must find it weird, right? That I'm indulging in all of this with you, when my body isn't..."

"Isn't what, my heart?" Yohan cups the side of Sol's face and urges him to look.

“Like yours,” Sol eventually blurts as tears rise to his eyes that meet with the knight’s. His voice is breathy, like air sucked out of the sky, “even I think it’s a bit —”

“Do you truly think it’s wrong?” Yohan asks, his expression has grown serious now, and he observes Sol with his eyebrows arched up in quiet pain. “What we are doing?”

“I don’t know.”

“And why would it be?” Yohan’s words are hushed as he speaks. “Are you not allowed to feel good, my love?” He caresses the side of Sol’s face, the touch is reassuring, a welcome warmth. “Why would it be, Sol?” he asks again, because Sol is silent and can find no right answer.

There is nothing wrong.

They are just making love.

“Yohan.” Sol grasps at the knight’s arm, he places his palm over Yohan’s forearm. There is hesitation in his voice yet, he still wants, *yearns* to ask. “Is there anything you fantasize about?” Sol blinks as he observes his lover, shy but curious all the same.

Yohan raises a brow at him. “Anything?”

Sol looks to the left, then to his right, as he flutters his eyelashes. “W-Well, after what we did today, it would feel only right to return the favor...”

His lover scoffs, then strokes the top of his head. “This isn’t about favors, my love.”

“Maybe so, but—” Sol squeezes at the taut muscle under his palm. “It would... arouse me, to do something for you.”

This confession gets a smirk out of Yohan. “Ah.” The knight licks his lips. His gaze darkens as he leans forward, until his mouth is right beside Sol’s ear. “Then, perhaps I shall tell you, after all.”

* * *

Being back in a big city after many weeks spent in the countryside is almost too much. The bright colors from banners hanging out of stores and the loud banter

of merchants flying through the air finds Sol a tad overwhelmed—he cringes as he steps out of the carriage with Yohan at his side.

Officially, the two of them have returned here to restock on a few things the cottage was lacking: mostly, certain spices, salts and herbs for Yohan's brews. *However*, they also have an ulterior motive in mind—a motive that has both their faces reddening, as Sol and Yohan look at each other with a mixture of excitement and glee dancing across their gazes.

“Are you *sure* we'll be able to find that here?” Sol asks him in a whisper; he is so troubled, so nervous and completely unable to keep Yohan's request out of his mind, that the fears which'd plagued him weeks ago upon first arriving in this city haunt him no longer.

They face a sea of unknown faces, bustling crowds who move in strange ways like giant swarms of butterflies or bees. Yohan nods and holds out his arm for Sol to take; he smiles as he stares down at Sol. “Shall we get going then, my love?”

Sol wraps his arms around Yohan's bicep, and clings to him just like he had done so last night. Sol never thought a day would come where he'd be able to let his guard down like so, where he would simply live and enjoy the present moment for what it is without it being tainted by scars from the past. And yet, today, he is okay.

Today everything feels right.

He and Yohan stride in then out of different tea shops, market stands selling herbs from foreign lands, until they finally reach a different part of the city where the stores are much more... *openly magical* than what Sol is used to.

In the air there are floating trinkets. Trapped in little vials, miniature avatars in the shape of ancient mammals who move as if alive have been threaded together with the energy of a mage's Gift that leave behind a golden sheen across their skins. In the darkness of the alleyways oddities with one too many eyes glow in the shadows when they shouldn't. Youth potions, vengeance balms, worn warlock scrolls are all spread out across stalls for the people to see—everything anyone could ever want is here. Sol shouldn't feel sick, but he does. This part of the city reminds him of the days he spent practicing magic. *Days spent beside —.*

“Sol? Do you want one?”

Sol cannot help himself from jumping where he stands, his arms stiffen by his sides. “H-Huh?”

Yohan points to a shelf hung in the air atop which sits a round vial, home to a pale, ethereal elk that swims in circles inside translucent glass.

But upon seeing the sight, Sol only holds on tighter to his lover’s arm with a shake of his head. “I’m good, thank you, dearest.” Sol stands on his tiptoes to give Yohan a chaste kiss on his cheek. “Let’s just go.”

He wants to pretend that everything is normal.

That everything is fine.

But it’s hard.

As they walk past the rest of the mage-owned shops, Sol wonders if Yohan notices how tense he has gotten, because the knight seems to pick up his pace not long after their talk.

They are almost out of the Marketplace Of Wonder when an elderly woman with cloak-covered features grasps at Sol’s wrist. The woman yanks him back and, for a moment, he and Yohan drift away.

“For you,” the woman says as she hands Sol a strange, silver vial whose contents are most likely water, judging by its weight and swerve. “You will need it.”

Sol’s ears ring. He eyes the woman with silent hesitance; he is on the verge of telling her he will not pay for just any random potion thrust into his hands, but the woman is long gone before he has a chance to speak.

He glances around, searching, seeking her figure—and yet in the end, the woman’s presence is as thin as mist. Sol can do nothing but shove the vial into his pocket, before he quickly catches up to Yohan again with a light jog.

“My love?” Yohan looks over his shoulder, to him, as he threads their arms together once more. “What did she want?”

Sol shrugs; the weight of the elderly woman’s vial weighs heavy in his pocket. “Beats me.”

Sol and his knight make a few more stops to buy provisions for the road ahead, before finally sifting through darker alleyways. Their footsteps are light and unassuming, as to make themselves more discreet. “And it’s around here, you said?” Sol hisses the question under his breath as he leans into Yohan on instinct when the two of them enter an arch of shadows.

“Sol...” Yohan lowers his voice. “Stop.” The knight points to a rather unassuming sign, outside an even more modest building tucked away near the back of the alley, without any stalls to exhibit its wares outside.

FOR THE CURIOUS & ADVENTUROUS, the sign reads. Sol’s shoulders tense. He gulps, he has never quite done this before—until recently he thought he never would.

But he and Yohan approach the little stone brick building, then step inside.

And Sol’s jaw falls. He has to hold himself back from yelping at the sight that greets him. Spinning in the air before him, levitated with magic, is *possibly* the biggest cock in the world. *It is bright blue, too...* Sol’s eyebrow twitches.

“Ah!” Two people poke their heads out behind the counter. “One moment!” They call out in unison.

It is rare to see more than one person running a store of this size nowadays, as he takes note of their matching rings, Sol wonders if they are a couple. “Now then,” the man clears his throat as he strides up to Yohan and Sol with a confident step. He motions to the store’s shelves and their contents: a myriad of carefully handcrafted genitalia which take on all shapes, sizes and colors. The man eyes Sol and then Yohan again. “What will it be? Are you here for a friend?” he asks. “For yourselves, *perhaps?*”

It is painless to talk about sex around Yohan, however, Sol recoils at the thought of explaining his needs, *like this*, to a total stranger. Sol shows the man a forced smile. “We’re just browsing.”

“Very well, Good Sir and Madam! My companion and I are here if you need anything!”

Ah.

Something is empty again in Sol’s heart.

It doesn’t hurt as much as it did before, but it feels somewhat like a slap in the face, especially after spending so long around others who treated him as himself. He isn’t used to the dull sting of being read as a woman anymore, it makes him want to run.

Still, he stays. It’ll all be over soon anyway.

This stranger isn’t what Sol came here for. After this short transaction, Sol doubts they will see each other again.

But, if given the choice, Sol would rather end this all the more quicker. The slight, feeling of embarrassment that slowly creeps into his veins is enough to make him restless. “Yohan,” Sol whispers in his knight’s ear, “m-maybe I should just pick anything, I don’t want to keep you waiting...”

“Sol!” Yohan blurts; the knight places both his palms against Sol’s shoulders then shakes his head, he leans in. “*This* is for you, too! Take all the time you need, I meant it.” he tells Sol.

And Sol admits, the encouragement makes him feel a tad less self-conscious. “Right.” He tugs at Yohan’s sleeve then kisses his knight’s cheek. “Um, t-thanks.”

With a gentle, guiding hand across Sol’s back, Yohan leads Sol into another corner of the shop where a cadre of penises are lined up in a neat row—these ones do not look as though they’ve been put through a dozen magical spells and are, in fact, much more similar to what Sol’d imagined he’d find when coming here. *A reassuring discovery*, Sol thinks; though, he supposes, the giant floating azure penis was quite a way to get his attention the moment he walked into the shop as a customer.

Because they are a little farther from the counter now—away from the shopkeepers’ gazes—Sol finds himself filled with a newfound confidence that he uses to search for a penis of his own. “Do *you* have a preference, though?” he asks Yohan, the question is muttered under his breaths as he sifts through one cylindrical rod after another, in hopes of finding his forever-cock.

Yohan slides his hand down Sol’s waist, then up his back again, and Sol relaxes under the touch on instinct. “My love,” Yohan leans forward, closer to his ear, “I just want yours,” he grunts, and Sol can hear the smile in his voice before his knight pulls away again.

This man will be the end of me, Sol thinks as his face warms again and his pulse beats loud in his chest. To think that just a mere few weeks ago he was still pretending to be Solange. *Never would Sol have dared dream of getting himself a penis... and yet, here he is today.*

Gods, how fast things can change.

Sometimes, Sol cannot help but wonder if he is dreaming, *especially today*. But it is fun. He is enjoying himself quite a lot—being here with Yohan is pleasant, and Sol makes a silent promise to himself, to bring Yohan as much pleasure as he always brings Sol every other night.

After a few more minutes have passed, so does the novelty of initially walking into the shop. Standing here doesn't feel all that odd anymore, and Sol even picks up the various unpackaged cocks they have on display for customers to feel their different materials and weights.

"I think..." Sol hums to himself as he grasps his two top choices in either of his hands—eventually, he holds one of them up then squints. "This one?" The prosthetic is of an ample size, it is smaller than Yohan's, though leaves little to be desired. It feels... natural, somehow. *Like his.*

Sol eyes widen as he thinks the words then realizes... it's also *quite* the realistic cock, which signifies it'll be worth a hefty sum of silver, especially since Sol is considering pairing it with with a harness imbued with magic that takes on the color of the wearer's skin for a more seamless effect—but, he supposes, he deserves the treat. He was never one for spending much coin back in Featherlaine, now, he has plenty of savings to dig into.

Yohan leans into him with a hum and a steady hand wrapped around Sol's waist. "I can pay for it, if you'd like."

"It's fine." Sol wouldn't be able to live knowing his lover paid for his own cock.

"Half?"

"It's fine." An odd, sense of pride grows in Sol's belly. He stands on his toes to kiss his neck. "It'll be for me, after all," he breathes against the warmth of his skin with a ravenous chuckle, "even if I can't wait to take you, too."

"All right, I understand," Yohan presses his lips softly into the crown of his head, yet Sol hears the heaviness in his breathing. "But at least let me buy the oil, and... anything else you might need to clean up once we're done."

That, Sol can live with.

With a nod and huff, Sol pulls away from the shelter of the knight's arms. He stares down to his fingers, stops to fiddle with the cock's retractable foreskin and places the sample model back down; like clockwork, it floats in place again.

Sol tries to reach for the back of the shelf where a batch of rather luxurious wooden cases hosting brand new prosthetics are stored, yet he realizes they are a width apart.

He pauses for a moment—if this shop's structure is anything to go off of, it is built in a similar manner to the Academy where he'd studied magic. And Sol

wonders if this applies to their cases, too.

If so, in theory... Sol furrows his brows as he inspects the shelf from afar, he *should* be able to make his designated case find him, instead of having to reach back like a fool. With a huff, he concentrates on the case and the cock inside it—there is a spark of something in the air that grows and spreads until finally Sol beckons the case closer with a curt, come-hither motion.

As expected, the case flies into his hand.

Sol stares down at it and blinks. “So, it does work the same.”

Yohan lets out a subtle yet still audible exhale. “That caught me off guard!” He laughs. “For a moment there, I almost thought you were being attacked by a cock in a box.”

“Case.” Sol clears his throat as he brushes his robe down. “It’s a case. And I merely...” Sol stares down to his hands. “I happened to remember how these types of shelves work, that’s all.” He doesn’t like thinking about the Academy nor of his time there, but it was like instinct, it was hard to help it.

The warmth of Yohan’s palm finds his shoulder once more. Sol glances up to his knight with parted lips, he clutches at the case. And Yohan smiles at him. “That’s really useful, Sol. Great work!”

Sol’s eyebrow twitches. “Why does it sound like you’re being sarcastic?”

“I’m not.” Yohan stares at him, blankly now. “I was merely thinking I should probably come to you for advice about storage, once my tea room is open. Well,” he nudges Sol’s arm with his elbow, “if you’re fine with me bothering you, of course.”

“O-Oh.” Sol didn’t realize Yohan considered the future—*their future together*—that much. It’s nice... to hear that the knight still pictures Sol in his life then, and that whatever it is they are doing by being lonely together naked in bed has not veered into a novelty at risk of wearing off. *Not, yet least*, Sol hates himself for the inkling of doubt that has crept into his mind, he quickly shakes it off and does his best to ignore his unease—nothing good has ever come from chasing fears, especially when Yohan has given him no reason to at all. “We should get going,” he tells Yohan. “It’ll be dusklight before we know it.”

Sol turns then steps towards the counter, with the case still firmly in hand, he slides it across pale marble towards one of the shopkeepers.

Perhaps, it is silly of him to assume the shopkeepers wouldn't speak with him about his purchase, because from the moment they spot him they do exactly that. "Oh! A prosthetic!" The shopkeeper's eyes widen as he calls out to Sol in mild surprise, before he stares back at Sol's face with a gaze missing even the slightest hint of judgment—merely, he seems to be lost in thought. "Are you certain?" he asks. "These are *quite* expensive, and if you are merely trying it out, we have less expensive options that might be of more practical use to—"

"I would like your most realistic option," Sol blurts before he can think it through. His shoulders tense.

The shopkeeper clears his throat. "Right." The corner of his eye twitches in a mild show of embarrassment, it seems he is beginning to understand that he has misread the situation. Sol almost feels sorry for him. "My apologies for that. Then..." The shopkeeper quickly turns the case around to check the number inscribed in its wood. "Hm, let me write you a receipt. You would like the harness, too, correct?"

Although the shopkeeper has done nothing wrong Sol can barely bring himself to look the man in the eye. Instead, he stays fixated on the case with his head hung awkwardly low. "Yes, that's... correct."

Must he be so awkward?

Sol feels like kicking himself—but his face is red and warm and he can't help the way he feels: mere weeks ago he could barely tell Yohan he wanted to be called Sol instead, there is only so much bravado and confidence his poor heart can conjure in such a small period of time.

"Right!" The shopkeeper perks up then looks over his own shoulder. "Honey! Could you come here for a second?" He turns back to face Sol with a friendly smile. He motions to the case—or more so, the prosthetic inside. "My wife handcrafts them! Since we're having a rather slow day right now, figured it'd be best if she explained the care instructions to you!"

Sol parts his lips to reply, yet before he has a chance at saying a word, the craftswoman strides up to him with a few different products in hand. "Hello again!" she chimes as she presents various vials and glass tubes shut tight with agglomerated corks. "These ones *all* come with the prosthetic—and if you ever run out, don't hesitate to return for a refill: the first one is free!" The craftswoman points to another lotion, and whether Sol wants to or not, all of

this is very reminiscent of potions he'd crafted before as a student in the Arts. "This is a magical cleanser," she tells him, "a splendid concoction we've crafted from only the highest of body safe ingredients! Once you're done with using your prosthetic, just rub a little bit of this on it: it'll help with keeping everything clean, so you won't have to worry about any strange curses or bacteria growing on it! Next, you also have this lotion in case you—"

As she continues to run him down on every single balm and accessory he can expect to find with his brand new purchase, Sol cannot help but admire her dedication to her craft and the product she's about to sell him. As much as Sol thought this would be awkward, her casual tone and explanation makes him feel oddly at ease. "And *if* you would prefer it to ejaculate during use"—the craftswoman holds up a much smaller triangular vial, inside which can be found crystalline fluids that glitter like liquid topaz—"pour *one drop* of *this* onto the tip before every usage, and the magic imbued inside will synchronize with your pleasure and the prosthetic's materials, for a rather realistic experience in that regard!" The craftswoman clears her throat. "Of course, do keep in mind that this concoction is *rather rare*, so any future refills will be... quite expensive."

Ejaculate? Sol's mouth hangs open in great astonishment, *it can do that?* "How does this work exactly?" he asks her.

"Ah! A curious one, are you?" The craftswoman snickers. "I *wish* we could reveal that." She motions to the vial and then to the prosthetic's case. "But, I'm afraid it's a trade secret unique to our little store."

Sol supposes that makes sense; during his studies he'd heard of graduated mages setting up shop here and charging quite the fee for very specific potions or concoctions, upon making certain... *discoveries* they'd then keep themselves. Despite the lack of customers haunting the shop today, Sol has no doubt these two make more than most the merchants in this city combined.

"Any other questions?" the craftswoman asks him with a hum.

But Sol merely shakes his head. "None, but thank you for the explanation." He grins at her. "That was actually very helpful, I appreciate it."

"Of course!" The craftswoman eyes Sol's robe for a moment before she returns his smile. "Always happy to help a customer—thank you for your patronage, young man!"

“Excuse me—” Yohan blurts from behind Sol as keeps a rather serious face. “I have a question, if I may?”

The craftswoman presents him with a curt nod, a smile, too. “Feel free!”

“Would saliva... damage it?” Yohan is still showing little to no emotion.

Meanwhile, Sol is melting into his boots. *That... is a good point*, Sol thinks to himself as he blinks then watches the conversation unfold in silence. *Still...*

Sol’s eyebrow twitches. *How can he say that with such a straight face?*

After coming to the conclusion that saliva would, in fact, not damage Sol’s cock: Yohan and Sol both thank the two shopkeepers for their time, then depart with their pockets emptier of coin and their hands full.

As they exit the shop, Sol threads his fingers through his knight’s then nudges their shoulders together. “Are you excited?” Though he is the one who poses the question, Sol almost sounds a tad more excited than the knight himself.

Yohan chuckles. He wraps his arm around Sol’s waist and hugs him from the side. “Very,” he tells him, before he leans in, his lips brushing against Sol’s cheek. “I can’t wait to feel you inside me, my love.”

The words go straight to Sol’s sex. Sol traps his lower lip between his teeth and stutters a mumbled reply. “I-I can’t wait to be inside you, too...”

He squeezes Yohan’s hand.

And Yohan squeezes back.

They fall into a comfortable silence as they walk, side by side, through the alleyways.

The two men only pull away once they’ve reached the main streets, where the sound of a parade catches Sol’s attention.

Sol briefly glimpses away from Yohan—only to find he is alone when he tries to find the knight’s hand again and merely reaches for air. “Yohan?” Sol’s voice trembles. He is in the middle of the crowd, in the eye of the ongoing parade, finding the knight will prove to be a difficult task.

It is getting dark in the sky. Sol considers calling out Yohan’s name, however, there is so much shouting and music and chatter in the air that the noise swallows Sol’s voice before it can reach the world.

Sol gulps and his throat is dry. He figures it might be best to trace his steps, until he is not in the main streets anymore, in hopes that Yohan might seek him

there.

“Shit,” Sol curses under his breath, his nails leave crescent marks inside his palm as his fingers turn into fists by his sides. *What now?*

Why now?

In an hour the sun will have set. The streets will be darkness, and Sol will be lost. *As if he isn't already.*

As Sol traces his steps, he considers the possibility of trying to return to the carriage alone, but although he wants to believe in his competence, he does not trust himself to find his way back there: he'd paid no heed to his surroundings when they'd passed the Marketplace Of Wonder, opting to look away from most of the streetsides instead, out of fear of remembering *too much*.

A path he does not recognize pulls him out of his thoughts; Sol's eyes widen. He pauses as his boots kick at a miniscule pebble, he is certain he did not ever walk these roads with Yohan. “I have to go back,” he whispers the silent promise to himself and turns, strides past another dark alleyway—but here the shadows have hands.

Out of the black an arm reaches for Sol's waist, it wraps itself around him like snakebite poison and no matter how much Sol thrashes it yanks him towards the chest of a man he does not recognize.

The pulse in his chest disappears, Sol shrivels in on himself and it hurts when he catches a glimpse of a mage's robe, when he stares down at his attacker's pointed boots.

Just like —'s attire.

“N-No!” Sol's voice is hoarse as he cries out and tries to step away. “No, no, no!” He is wildfire, a heartbeat uncaged, Sol's throat is aching but, *Please*.

Please, he does not want to see him again.

Not like this.

Not ever.

Not here.

He looks elsewhere from the man and elbows him right in the gut—and for a moment, there is silence, then peace—and yet there is also no escape.

Because *he* does not let go.

And when Sol looks upward his eyes meet with an even darker alleyway, that is gaping and baring its teeth—*who knows what might await him at the end*—but

anywhere is better than here.

Sol braces himself. To shove the man with all his might. And run. *Yes, that is what he must do.*

“Sol?”

Sol’s head snaps toward the voice calling out his name.

Someone reaches for his and his captor’s wrist, they are pulled apart in seconds like yolk and egg separating from shell. And soon, that same Someone starts arguing with the man.

The sounds of their quarrel fall into oblivion as Sol grasps at the waistfabric of his robe tightly, he still cannot bring himself to look up—to check who it is that has come to his aid and who has caused him need to be aided. His legs shake, frozen in place, hyperventilation becomes a familiar demon and Sol keeps a hand on his heart that has gone from a state of death to running laps in his ribcage like a terrified hare.

Run, Sol thinks to himself. *Run, and don’t, don’t ever—*

“My love, it is okay.” A gentle, soft familiar hand warms his sweat-slicked shoulder. “Breathe.”

Breathe?

Sol’s eyes widen, he glances up to his knight, his lips and fingers are trembling still. And he snuffles. “Y-Yohan.” In the midst of finding Yohan’s gaze once more, Sol catches a glimpse of his assailant in accident—for reasons Sol ignores, the man seems petrified, too.

Yet there is good news: the man is not —. And Sol has never been so glad to be wrong in his life. For the first time in what feels like forever, he takes a breath. But he does not rest. Questions left unanswered slide into his mind. “W-Why—” Sol pants the words as his brows furrow, he raises his wrist and shows it to the elderly mage. “Why did you grab me?”

The elderly mage lifts both his hands before his own chest in a quiet defense. “I apologize, deeply, but you were headed for a rather dangerous area of town.” He clears his throat, then averts his gaze. “They’ve been abducting mages lately, you see... Considering your robe, you would have become a target had you gone past this street.”

Sol’s face scrunches into a scowl, now. “You could have spoken to me instead of doing”—he heaves in a breath—“that.”

"I feared that I would have scared you off, and that you would have run in the wrong direction."

Sol cannot say whether the man is being truthful, or if he was trying to get a hold of a mage himself...regardless, as the elderly mage shows him a curt bow, Sol has no way of knowing.

And neither does he want to.

"Truly, I am sorry, young man. If I had known, I would not have..."

The elderly mage's voice trails off.

And Sol feels Yohan's palm rubbing soft circles into his back. "It's okay, Sol," the knight whispers to him as he wraps an arm around Sol's shoulders. "You're safe now."

After a few more seconds have passed, Sol grips at the fabric of his own robe that bunches up between tightened fists as he stares the elderly man in the eyes. "Thank you, I suppose... for trying to stop me, at least," Sol mutters, in case the mage speaks true; although... he doesn't feel quite as appreciative as he speaks these words since he is still having trouble breathing, Sol figures it is better to be scared than dead. *Or worse.*

"Take care, now!" The elderly mage waves his farewells as he strides away in the opposite direction; Sol barely has a moment to respond before the mage has disappeared into the shadows.

Not a moment longer passes until Yohan wraps his arms around him. "Sol." Sol can feel him trembling. "Sol." The knight's voice is hushed. "Gods, am I glad that you are safe."

Sol embraces him in turn then leans into Yohan—*his place of shelter, his knight*. "Y-Yohan—" He snuffles. "I was so scared, I-I thought—"

"I know." Yohan caresses the back of his head gently. "I know, Sol. But it is okay. You are not alone. Not anymore."

I am okay... Sol tries to repeat the words to himself like a spell. *But is he?* he wonders. *Is he truly all right?* He never thought he would react like so, not after all he's been through, no after these past few months.

He had hoped — did not have such a grip on him anymore.

Is he all right?

Is this what healing is like?

As much as Sol wishes he could remain here for a little while longer to catch his bearings and breath, the elderly mage's words ring in his mind: *They've been abducting mages lately.*

"Let's..." Sol mutters as he stares into the void, the darkness of the alleyway that appears as though it could swallow him whole, should he step any further inside. "Let's get going," Sol tells Yohan.

He holds onto the knight's arm again. Their silhouettes flicker then fade across old streetside walls until they are engulfed by the light again, destined to disappear as the two return to the main street, the parade.

When they pass the crowds and celebrations, Yohan and Sol walk through the city with a heavy silence thickening the air.

"I would have looked for you," Yohan tells him, his voice a welcome solace among the ever-growing sounds of their footsteps, and Sol's grasp tightens around his lover's arm. "If he'd taken you, I wouldn't have stopped searching until I would have found you."

Sol pauses in his steps. His head hangs low as he stares at the speck of dirt smeared across his boots. "But..." *What about you, Yohan?* "What if you'd had to search for centuries? What, then?" Sol traps his lower lip between his teeth. "What of your dreams? The tearoom and—"

"You think that is more important than you?" Yohan stops in his tracks. He turns to stare at Sol. "Even if it took a thousand years to find you, I could not live with myself if I valued my dreams over another's life, especially yours."

Sol's lips quiver, and a rising warmth tightens his throat. He looks up to his knight with his brows arched upward, then steps forward to embrace his lover again. Yohan's armor is cold against his skin and, perhaps, some faces from the sea of the city's crowds have stopped to watch them with curious glances—but Sol cannot find it in himself to care. "Yohan," he whispers, choked up and on the verge of tears again as he shuts his eyes then buries his face into the knight's chest. "You selfless fool."

* * *

That night, Sol jolts from Yohan's touch and finds that he does not want him in his usual, carnal manner. And Yohan tells him it is okay. And they make love in other ways; reading books together beneath candlelight, Yohan and Sol embrace each other in bed for hours. Being away from the knight was painful—even if it was only minutes—it seems Yohan felt the same.

They had both wandered this world alone for too many a year, that now, after finding minute ways into each other's hearts, it is hard to let go. Yohan kisses Sol's eyelid. As his palm cups Sol's jaw, Sol presses their bodies so closely together that he isn't sure where he begins, and where Yohan ends, anymore.

The warmth of their hands find one another. The room glows a deep orange. Artificial firefly light casts gnawing shadows across their skins. "I never thought I would meet you," Sol whispers, and Yohan holds him closer—closest. He does not know why he wants to cry. "It was hard to believe you were real."

Yohan takes his lips, mouthing little *I love yous* as they kiss.

Sol remembers a world without his lover and wonders, if it ever existed, in the end. When Sol would pray for the Riders to take him away, when Yohan would drink brews cooked with herbs prepared lands away by Sol.

Everything has led me to here—to him, Sol thinks and perhaps, it is true. Perhaps, it was fate. That gravity had pulled them together from the day they first stepped into this world unknowing, destined to meet.

Destined for each other.

He breathes in the scent of him as the crickets sing outside. "Yohan," indeed, the name feels familiar on Sol's lips, in the way that the sun does on one's skin in the summer. "I don't think we were ever alone," he mumbles, half-asleep, half-awake as he wraps his arm tighter around the man that he loves.

"I think... that we were always here."

* * *

One day it is raining on a Sunday. The curtain of dew drops that pepper the windows makes Sol feel as if he is underwater, hugged by the ocean and held by

its waves: he imagines, that if he looks hard enough, he may see a fish swim by the wet glass panes.

A pleasant aroma of pancakes wafts through the kitchen air.

Yohan is cooking; minutes ago he lit a lantern that now rests atop the kitchen counter, and Sol watches with warm fondness in his heart as his knight loses himself to the task. Yohan had risen early in the morning, then sweetly kissed Sol back to sleep when he'd stirred, worried—the knight had reassured him, said there was nothing to worry about, “I merely want to try a new brew with the ingredients we found last week, my love.”

Now, Sol wonders how early in the morning that was exactly, for he cannot remember having seen the sun, then. He has realized over these past few months living with Yohan, that the knight tends to rise early, even when the two of them have nowhere to be but home.

Is this how he has always been?

Or was the habit forged from his life's many demands?

Sol thinks, that he will have to ask him later.

As Yohan flips his final pancake that lands with a modest thud and a sizzle against the dark pan, he huffs with a proud exclamation. “There!” He smirks as he stares down at his very appetizing work. “All done.”

He serves Sol a most delicious breakfast, and beneath the table Sol rubs the back of his foot up Yohan's leg as he reaches for the knight's hand, he gives it a squeeze between his fingers. “Thank you,” he tells his lover with a grin and a palate full of joy, “this is really great.” Sol sighs as he observes Yohan with fond love in his gaze. “There isn't one thing that you make that I don't enjoy, Yohan.”

Outside, the rainfall grows heavier; so do the drops falling against the windowpanes. Yohan's shy laughter fills the room with a lightness that lifts Sol's heart, and the two talk about their days, how they wish to spend their future summers and winters, and reflect on how tired they have been. “I can't wait for us both to have a break,” Yohan tells Sol with the most sincere of smiles as he pours Sol a fresh cup of tea.

Sol stretches his arms to the ceiling, he turns his head then looks out the window to the wet, cold hibernating world. He chuckles. “That makes two of us, then.”

The taste of Yohan's newest brew is as sweet as the knight's lips, once he and Sol share another kiss together across the table. "When the weather is warmer," Yohan whispers as he stares at Sol through half-lidded eyes, "I'd like to show you something."

"Oh?" Sol nudges at his leg again with a snicker; he rubs their noses together. "What *else* could you possibly surprise me with, Yohan?"

"Fields full of sunflowers," Yohan tells him, "each the more golden than the last—it would be lovely if you saw them, at least once, we could go on our way home."

We. Home. Sol's heart is giddy when he hears the words and thinks about the concept of *them. Their house. Their journey. Their world.*

He takes another sip of Yohan's brew. "I'd love that," Sol tells Yohan with a hand rested above the knight's knuckles, a smile.

It is true, he very much is looking forward to it.

He can already imagine himself laying amid the fields by Yohan's side, under the warmth of the sun, into the warmth of his arms.

The conversation moves then shifts, it is not long before they find themselves in the midst of making plans for a picnic before their inevitable departure. Sol didn't think it was possible, and yet that morning—as they talk and drink and laugh together over breakfast—he only falls harder for the man.

When they have finished with their meal, Sol rises from his seat. He walks on over to his knight. Yohan glances up at him from the table. And Sol lifts his knee then straddles Yohan's waist, until he is seated across the knight's lap. "Hi again," Sol whispers with a smile as he pushes Yohan's hair back, and kisses the knight's forehead.

Yohan leans forward—into him—until his fingers are pressed to Sol's waist. He glances up to Sol. "Hello, my heart." He peppers kisses down Sol's neck, a low, lust-filled growl slips past his teeth. "Are you going to fuck me?" Yohan's voice is softer than Sol expects, *pliant, even.*

There is a breath, and then two. Sol's fingers skitter up the knight's neck, he lets his palm rest against it, lets himself feel the stirring thuds of his lover's pulse. Sol leans in to trap the knight's lower lip, softly, into his mouth. "How badly do you want it?"

Yohan's panting falls, hot and heavy unto his skin. "I can show you—" he gasps, and he undresses, without ever looking away from Sol's gaze; until he is bare, his cock erect in full and on display for Sol to admire, *to devour*.

A scarlet blush rushes to the knight's face, down his ears and shoulders.

Sol never realized his lover had such a vulnerable side—it is like seeing the moon after feeling the sun, and it only makes the wanting in his heart grow.

Sol's smile darkens. He runs nimble fingertips down Yohan's chest and watches as the knight shivers with clear anticipation. "I think..." He brings his attention back to his lover's face. "I will—and, perhaps," Sol smirks, "I may fulfill your *other requests*, too."

And Yohan heaves in a heavy, weightful breath. "*Sol*." He shuts his eyes, his brows arch like his broad, pretty back has against the chair. "*Please*. I am mad for you."

Warmth blooms in Sol's chest. He rises to his feet, floorboards creak as he offers his palm up to the knight, and takes his fingers that tremble with the flutter of excitement; Yohan's skin is warm against his.

He leads Yohan atop the bed, urges him onto his stomach. A song of lust and wonder thumps then swells inside Sol's heart as he marvels at his lover's back. Yohan has obeyed him. Yohan is waiting—*waiting, to be taken by Sol*.

Across the bed.

Shaped like Sol's future.

And, Gods, is he perfect.

And, Gods, does Sol want to make love to him.

Oh, Gods, will he. Again. And again. And again.

Sol reaches into the bedside table for oils, his cock and harness.

He had delayed this because the world had been busy and so had his mind, but today he feels ready. *Ready to try*.

Sol undresses but only from the waist down, opting to keep his rather tight undershirt on after having discarded his tunic. He slips into the harness and feels it hug around his thighs. In an instant, the harness takes on the color of his skin like a chameleon, he can barely notice its presence anymore—and for once, when he looks downward, there is quiet peace in his mind.

Nothing feels wrong nor out of place anymore. "Oh." Sol cannot help the small, soft gasp that leaves him. He had assumed he would feel mostly aroused whilst

exploring this part of himself in this situation and its very context—yet, of all feelings there is to hold and grab onto, only one floods his mind: relief.

The feeling of *wrongness* he always carried on his shoulders is gone.

And then, Sol comes back to himself. He remembers what he was doing in the first place, when he catches a glimpse of Yohan's backside again. And it is there that his heart swells anew with yearning. Sol kisses him everywhere—from his shoulders down to his thighs, his arms, his calves.

He spills oil onto his fingers and massages gentle circles into Yohan's ass, his palm flat against the curve of the knight's plump backside. Yohan groans underneath him—Sol notices the way his lover grinds his hips, down onto the mattress—he loves the way Yohan sounds when he whimpers.

He cups Yohan's ass, then gives it a firm squeeze. "You're relaxed here. What did you do all morning long?" He chuckles, and presses another slick finger to the front of Yohan's entrance. "Darling."

"Gods, *Sol*." Yohan hisses and trembles under him. "You *know*."

Indeed, Sol does. It is not a hard guess, when he notices how loose Yohan already is. "Impatient, are you, dearest?" he coos.

"S-Sol—"

Sol is grateful to Yohan for giving him this much power willingly. It is a high Sol is riding like no other; he makes a silent promise to himself, that he will treat the knight to as much pleasure as he can grant him. He wants to show Yohan how loved he is.

"Yohan." With his free hand, Sol's fingers trail down the knight's neck, they trace invisible paths across his shoulders, his elbows. "Relax."

Sol pushes two fingers into him, and Yohan squeezes around his knuckles—being inside his lover like this has Sol biting his own lip, Sol can feel the wetness of his own arousal dripping between his thighs, especially as Yohan's pulse thrums in rapid, restless thumps across his fingers.

The gradual intrusion finds Yohan moaning; Sol has never heard him make such a sound before—not like this. He hopes to hear it again.

He moves, and Yohan whimpers. "Sol, *Gods*." Yohan groans. "*My darling*." Sol finds himself wondering what this experience of being taken apart then put back together in mere seconds must be like for Yohan.

The knight who is finally letting go after holding on for so long, *after never allowing himself to feel.*

Well, Sol grins as he licks the underside of Yohan's chin, *until tonight, that was.*

He embraces Yohan from behind with his fingers still lodged deeply inside him, Sol rubs up against Yohan's sweetest spot and the knight's legs tremble then give. "Good boy," Sol whispers as he tries to soothe Yohan's heavy, hitching breaths, he kisses the back of Yohan's head, and Yohan grinds down against him. "*Such a good boy.*"

Yohan whimpers, he begs Sol for more and tenses around him again. "Please, Sol—" The knight grits his teeth. "I'm close."

Upon hearing his lover's soft plea, Sol pauses to rub at Yohan's ass; he admires the way firm muscle gives under the press of his touch. "Are you sure?"

Yohan nods, and his shoulders tense ever so slightly. "I..." Sol is paying attention to his every move, every subtle change to gauge his lover's discomfort, in hopes of finding none. "I took long enough to prepare this morning."

Sol heaves in a long drawn out breath. "Is that so." The image of his lover sneaking away during the early morning hours to finger himself in the bathroom has Sol's sex burning with a throbbing heat.

Truly, Yohan will drive him mad one day.

Sol kisses the crown of Yohan's head again. "Yohan," he whispers, voice soft like feathers as he spills oil onto his cock then pumps. He dips his thumb atop Yohan's ample thighs then spreads the knight's ass.

"Yohan," Sol cannot help the smile that takes his lips as he speaks his lover's names and thinks about all that it means. "You're adorable, you know that?"

He presses himself to Yohan's entrance, and Yohan whimpers and moans around Sol's name.

"Is it good for you?" Sol asks with a kiss buried in Yohan's shoulder.

Yohan's voice is slurred, all he provides is a nod and a small, quiet, "Please," and, "more..."

Sol threads his fingers through the knight's hair. Yohan squirms beneath him. "Yohan." Sol thinks of all their early mornings spent together, the times during which they'd talk late into the nights, how Yohan's smile is always crooked when he gets too excited talking about tea. "Yohan." He thinks of these

past few weeks, all that Yohan has given him—*all that Yohan has shown him*—and he thrusts into him, dragging his cock against Yohan’s insides, drawing moans each the more holy from his lover’s lips. And Yohan gives himself to him again. And Sol’s heart is full. He has never felt so whole. “Yohan,” he echoes as he holds his lover close. “I love you.”

I love you.

“You are all I need.”

Yohan grinds his hips downward, he moves, tries to fit all of Sol’s cock with a desperate needy hiccup.

Sol cannot take his eyes off him, it is like Yohan has cast a spell on him and he is transfixed, watching in lustful fascination as Yohan slowly devours all of him. He runs a finger down the knight’s spine then embraces him tightly. “I wish to spend my life with you,” the whispered confession leaves Sol before he can think. He isn’t sure if Yohan hears, but it does not matter, for he knows his lover will understand him through touch if not words.

How Sol craves him.

How Sol holds him.

How Sol nibbles on his ear as Yohan reaches behind himself to grasp onto Sol’s waist in an attempt to pull him even closer. Yohan tenses, his thighs trembling as he groans then comes, spilling hot milky seed all over the bed’s mattress.

Outside, the wind rustles the trees and leaves that quiver like Sol’s arms shake, when he embraces the knight dearly. Yohan has given himself to him in ways Sol will never forget—*in truth, he always wanted this*, to take a man in such ways.

He’d just needed permission.

Sol urges Yohan onto his back. The knight greets him—*yielding*—and Sol is drunk on the thrill. He kisses him until his lips hurt. There is something urgent welling inside him now that he has tasted this once, Sol can only think about doing it again. He wonders if it is the same for Yohan.

He rests his head against the knight’s chest and listens to the deep thumping of his heart, until his mind is smothered with the sound of Yohan. As Sol leaves mellow caresses against his knight’s skin, traces soft shapes across his nipples, Sol glances up to him. “How was that?”

“I—” Yohan heaves in a breath, his eyes are wide, in the certain way when wonder takes one’s face and leaves a man breathless. “I didn’t want it to end.”

“You’re not the only one,” Sol’s voice is barely a mumble, he is still so aroused as he takes in Yohan’s flushed features with a libidinous grin; the face his lover makes right after being taken is more than enough to light a fire in his belly. And Sol finds himself grinding his cock against Yohan’s leg, until he feels enough pressure against his sex and whimpers, and gasps.

Soon, Yohan’s lips are on his again, the knight’s big hot palm gripping at his waist. Candlelight wax drips onto a silver plating nearby.

“Yohan,” Sol breathes between a chuckle as their eyes meet, lidded, wanting. “Are you hard again?”

The knight mouths kisses across Sol’s neck. And Sol relaxes under his touch. Yohan’s breaths are like little comets, warming Sol’s skin with a mystical burn, Sol feels like they are endless. And maybe he is right. “I’d thought about doing this for so long,” Yohan finally tells him, “can you blame me, if I am a little excited?”

And Sol’s eyes widen; it occurs to him that he is Yohan’s first in this regard. Sol’s voice grows a tad softer, he blinks, as if plunged into another reality that slowly unveils itself to him. “I’m sorry,” he says, whilst he looks at him with mild regret bubbling in his gaze. “I wish... I could have taken more time with—”

But Yohan silences him with his lips. A smile. “I kept asking you to put it in, my love.” The low, rumble of his voice calms Sol. “It is all right. And,” Yohan snickers. He raises his eyebrows playfully at Sol playfully. “We can always do this again, if you so wish.”

Yohan cups the side of Sol’s face and smiles. “Sol,” he mumbles. “You are so precious to me.” He leans in, his lips brush against Sol’s forehead. “I am enamored—with all of you.”

Tears form crescent linings in the hollow of Sol’s eyes, his lips quiver as they collide with Yohan’s. “I am, too.” His brows raise with modest joy when he stares at Yohan with a lovely warmth growing inside his chest.

Yohan pulls Sol in like the tide, Sol’s face is hot—but whether it is from Yohan’s body heat or his own, he cannot say. “Would you like to?” Yohan asks. “Put it in again, I mean.”

Sol lets out a breath he hadn't known to be holding. He is relieved to find he has done a good enough job, that his lover is already coming back for more. Part of him was a tad nervous he would mess things up, or that this would not be as pleasurable for Yohan as he'd hoped. *He did not want to let him down.* "What position?" Sol murmurs as he continues to lay across his lover's chest, he draws errant, lazy circles across Yohan's bicep.

"I could be on top."

Sol pauses for a moment.

On top... He gulps. It does not take him long to form an image in his mind of what that may look like. *Yohan, grinding down on his cock from above?* The mere eroticism of the idea has him blushing in an instant.

Yes, please, Sol thinks. "Um," he blurts awkwardly, overcome with lust from the newfound suggestion, a reddening blush rising to his ears. "I think that sounds lovely." He doesn't know why he's trying to stay polite about it when the two of them have already seen almost, if not all of each other. *And yet right now, it feels like Yohan is blessing him in more ways than one.* Sol is overcome with the need to worship his lover like a deity of love.

"Ah." Yohan parts his lips. "Truly?"

It is odd, that he seems surprised.

Sol furrows his brows. "Of course!" He bats his eyelashes as he looks bashfully from the left to the right, until he finds the courage to glance at Yohan again. "Yohan, I'll be honest with you..." Sol sighs. He gives Yohan's thigh a gentle rub, and kisses the knight on the cheek before moving closer to his ear. "I think you are perfect in every way," he whispers. "*Gods*, being inside you like that was thrilling, I—" Sol grasps at Yohan's hand; and squeezes. "You arouse me to no end, Yohan. When I think of you my mind fills with yearning. You have lit a fire in me, and I... I can find no other way to put it other than..." Sol pulls away to look him in the eye. "I want you." He smiles. "I want *you*, Yohan. Every part of you."

For a moment, Yohan does not move—it is as though he is too busy comprehending, *feeling* Sol's confession, to respond. Until another few seconds pass, and he threads their fingers together, then squeezes back. Yohan's eyes meet Sol's anew, and he returns his fond expression, his grin. "Then," Yohan says as his free palm finds Sol's jaw once more. "Why don't we use the potion this time?"

Sol gulps then nods, transfixed by Yohan who is now straddling his waist, grasping at the bottle that he pours onto Sol's cock with a carnal grin.

As Sol reaches for Yohan's waist, he thumbs at the knight's hipbone. He watches as Yohan lowers his ass atop the tip of his cock, *hot* feverish longing clouds his gaze. "You're so perfect like this," Sol whispers the words to his knight who writhes, his eyes rolling back as he slides himself on Sol's cock and threads their nimble trembling fingers together; Sol squeezes the space above Yohan's knuckles. "You're such a good, loving man." Sol smiles, then chuckles when Yohan's cock twitches at the words, truly, he is divine. Sol's eyes briefly widen as he watches Yohan unravel on top of him like so. "You deserve all the pleasure I am giving you," he whispers to Yohan. "You deserve to be happy."

Yohan whimpers, as he grinds down against Sol, he leans forward to press a desperate kiss to Sol's lips—yet when Sol thrusts upwards, into him, the knight chokes around a moan and misses his mouth—his face burrows into Sol's shoulder instead.

Sol runs his fingers through the knight's hair and holds him closer. "My darling," he purrs. "Aren't you a good boy?"

"Ah—*Sol!*" Yohan's knees tremble around him when he hears the sweet praise. "Y-You're—" He groans then grinds down against Sol, his eyes wide with pleasure. "H-Hitting my—" But when Sol reaches down to massage Yohan's cock, the only sound left across the knight's lips is a breathy gasp.

Sol rubs circles into the wet shine of Yohan's tip, his beloved's come sticks, slick across his fingers as he makes a fist around Yohan's cock then pumps him, slow. "You're doing so well, Yohan—so good for me."

Yohan whimpers, and Sol feels him tremble and feels, as though he has understood something about his lover today.

Though the knight so often shows Sol his bravest faces—at his core, he is merely a man who wanted to be held and vulnerable, yet hid away his heart, so that it would not be taken from him.

So that he could survive.

But they are not just surviving anymore.

And Sol intends to show him that.

"You're so hard, Yohan," Sol nibbles on Yohan's ear as he lowers his voice to a whisper, he asks the knight, "Are you going to come for me?" His palm finds

Yohan's spine that he traces with his fingers; Sol is losing his mind from having rendered his lover into this state of bliss, no greater flattery could exist than to see Yohan desperately writhing, impaled on his cock. "You're so pretty like this, Yohan."

And it seems that, too, is all the encouragement Yohan needs it seems, for soon the knight is thrusting into Sol's hand that still pumps him gently; the knight chants Sol's name ceaselessly hushed, like it is sin.

"My dearest love," Sol tells him when he deepens their embrace, "*Yohan.*" As Sol continues to fuck his beloved through his orgasm, his palm finds the back of Yohan's neck. He whispers, "I love you."

And Yohan presses their noses together, he pants into Sol's parted lips. Their skins are sweat clad, hot. Sol smiles again. "I love you," he tells him, "*so much.*" *You've no idea.*

Sol's eyes fill with wonder and fascination as the magic warms his own cock, he watches himself spill inside the knight. There is so much thick, white come—a lifetime's worth, even—it slips out of Yohan, down his thighs. "Oh, *Gods*, Sol."

Yohan leans down to cup Sol's face just like he does whenever they kiss in bed every night. His smile is languid, lustful. "You are so generous, my heart," he tells Sol, his words slurred between his teeth, as saliva drips down his lips. A lazy, soft chuckle leaves him, before he tilts his head to kiss Sol's cheek. "T-Thank you," Yohan's breaths quicken, his legs tremble again around Sol; he giggles again. "I feel so full, so loved by you." The smile Yohan wears is crooked and quivering with desire, *want* as he stares down at Sol, his face flushed red.

As they kiss, Yohan raises himself up and pushes against his knees until Sol has slipped out of him. The knight falls onto the bed again, panting—now, the two of them lay flat beside one another on their backs, their heads turned towards the inside of the bed; Sol and Yohan grin as their gazes meet.

Yohan reaches for Sol's cock, he makes a palm around it then strokes him, softly, gently. "I love how you felt inside me," he tells Sol through hushed, breathless whispers. "Your cock is so lovely."

Sol thrusts into his palm on instinct. He cannot hold back the quiver in his lip upon hearing Yohan's praise. *That his lover would want his cock like this... Sol hadn't imagined it would ever happen in his lifetime, he is feeling oddly emotional.*

“Oh, look at you,” Yohan tells him with another, soft smile as his attention drifts to Sol’s cock. “A lot more’s coming out.” Sol cannot help but follow the direction of his beloved’s gaze. “I’m flattered, Sol.”

It is true, the magic is still well in effect as thick white pearl spills from Sol’s tip, onto Yohan’s fingers. Sol *knows* he cannot feel it, and yet the sight finds him so incredibly aroused all the same, has his breaths quickening, his lips aquiver. Sol thrusts his hips upward again, into Yohan’s palm. His mind is empty, ever so full of *relief*. *How soothing it is, Sol thinks, to finally feel whole: to feel as if he, as if everything—everything—is where it should be.*

Yohan rolls onto his side; he presses a kiss to Sol’s forehead. “*Gods, Sol,*” his hand rests against the back of Sol’s head. He buries his face into the crook of Sol’s shoulder. “I want to make you happy.”

“You already do,” Sol can’t help but tear up as he embraces his knight, his savior, his love. “You do.”

Truly, you do.

* * *

They fall asleep, naked beside each other for a good few hours. Then, when the sun is an orange globe in the sky and the birds have stopped singing, and they have lain in bed for another hour’s quarter: Sol and Yohan rise to wash themselves in the shower.

It is clear Sol underestimated how physically taxing all that thrusting would be, he is a tad sore all over. *Still*, Sol thinks as a smile curls his lips upward, he is glad that he did this.

That he was able to experience being with Yohan in this absolute delight of a way fills his heart with the simple magic of love. Underneath the shower’s brittle water stream, Sol looks to his lover, the fondness he feels for him warms his chest. *Everything is such a dream, even though it is real.*

“Sol,” Yohan threads his fingers through Sol’s hair in a gentle touch, he hums. “May I wash your back, my love?”

Sol shows him a modest nod as he smiles then feels the welcome warmth of Yohan’s hands on his skin; the knight pulls a sigh from Sol’s lips.

“My heart, was it... Good for you, too?”

Sol isn't sure why Yohan sounds so hesitant, he frowns, then leans into his beloved. As Yohan runs his fingers, soap-suds down Sol's spine, “Why wouldn't it be good?” Sol asks him with his eyes shut as he focuses on the gentle massage.

“You didn't climax,” the knight croaks, “I— I fell asleep before I could make you...” As his voice trails off, Sol relaxes into him with a sigh.

“That doesn't change that it was lovely, Yohan.” Sol chuckles. “One of the best times of my life even,” he adds with a smirk, as he recalls the ways in which Yohan writhed underneath him, how exquisite his lover sounded with every little touch Sol left against his skin.

“Yohan,” Sol turns, to wrap his arms round the knight's middle, he kisses the muscle over his heart. “You do not have to make me come every time, for me to enjoy *this*.” He deepens his hold on the knight. And then, a thought comes to mind. “What of you?” Sol asks him. “How...was it? W-Would you want to do it again one day?”

“Gods. *Yes*,” Yohan speaks the word through the breath of a shaken confession. He rests his fingers against Sol's waist, then guides him under the water again, until the soap that had coated his back like some sort of strange reptilian skin is washed off his body, falling faded by his feet.

“Truly I want to,” Yohan admits, his voice softer now, “but I was afraid.”

“Afraid?”

Yohan nods.

And Sol can only blink. *Afraid?* “What of?”

“That you would not enjoy it—*enjoy having me*—in this way.”

A pinprick of worry punctures Sol's heart. “Come now,” Sol tries to lighten up the mood, but the only sound that leaves his lips ends up a forced, miserable laugh. “I may not have a penis that functions like yours, but it's still nice that we can—”

“No,” Yohan blurts. “That isn't quite—” He shakes his head, then pulls Sol in close. Yohan buries his lips into the crown of Sol's head. “No, my heart, I—” Yohan pauses, before he sighs. “Everyone has always depended on me. For as long as I can remember, I have always served as a pillar, so, to break myself down—to make myself small, vulnerable for my lover... I feared you would see me as a different man once we were done.”

“But—Yohan,” Sol brings a cupped palm to Yohan’s jaw. He stares up at his beloved, and his brows arch upward. “I want to see you. *All* of you,” Sol tells him. “When I told you earlier that I loved everything about you, I meant what I said.”

He stands on his tiptoes to press their lips together. “Please,” he whispers to his knight, as their gazes meet anew. “Don’t hold back.”

Because I need you, Sol thinks, every part of you.

I want to unravel you, Yohan, as you unravel me.

Until the day we’ll gaze into ourselves and feel the need to hide no longer. Until I am you. And you are me. And we are each other.

“Tell me what you need.”

“You,” the word sounds tender against his tongue as Yohan speaks, breathless, before he pulls away from Sol. The knight brushes the hair out of Sol’s face, and greets him with a smile. “You are all I need, Sol.”

Sol buries his face into his beloved’s chest, he does not want to let Yohan see the way his cheeks flush at such an unequivocal declaration of love he knows likely won’t ever withstand the truth nor trials of life. “That’s not true...” Sol mumbles under his breath. “You need food, and water, and oxygen, too. I am not any of those things.”

And the knight laughs. “Perhaps.” He strokes Sol’s back softly. “You are right.” Yohan’s lips find the crown of his head again. “But, I still think I need you regardless, my love. You have become the sun to my days, after all.” Yohan stares down at Sol with his palm pressed to Sol’s cheek, there is something so earnest, so vulnerable about his expression. “How could I ever forget you now?”

Sol finds himself getting emotional over Yohan’s sincerity. It is strange, and yet, he feels the same. *As much as he tries, he could not imagine his life without Yohan now.*

For a minute, Sol lies to himself and pretends he does not want to cry. *Over such simple words...* But it makes him so happy—Yohan makes him so happy—and his confession fills Sol with so much light and radiance, Sol simply cannot hold it in. “Y-Yohan,” he snuffles as his tears fall atop Yohan’s shoulders. “Is it truly okay to want you like I do?” It is so easy to love him, and each day is so full of joy, that it almost feels like it is wrong.

How could matters of the heart ever be this simple?

Yohan's big, warm hand skids down his chest, his fingers rest atop Sol's heart. "Are we not allowed our happiness, my love?" he asks Sol. "After all we have been through, and seen, is it not okay to want? To love?" He wraps an arm around Sol's shoulders again and embraces him closer. "To live?"

Sol thinks of all the times he'd felt numbed to his once-monotonous life. All those moments where he believed he would never trust again, *never like this*. He finds himself grinning before he can even think. Sol leans into his lover's chest as the shower's warmth then greets them again in a soft, light drizzle, a low hissing surrounds their figures. "Then," Sol parts his lips, "I will keep wanting you," he speaks the words through his smile, whilst he looks up to Yohan.

The knight deepens their embrace. "As will I, my love," Yohan whispers beside Sol's temple. "Through death and hardships, and everything that is to come, I will love you—and even after that, too."

Sol cannot say what it is exactly, but that night, something changes between them.

They are no longer strangers visiting each other's quarters, but rather, two lovers building a home together instead.

"I want to keep loving you, too." Sol listens to Yohan's heartbeat as he presses his cheek to the knight's bare skin.

He shuts his eyes, then thinks—*for a long, long time*.

II: Summer

Summer greets them faster than the fleeting spring.

Sol's initial duties have long-since ended, however, he has decided to remain by Yohan's side at the royal manor to aid Elizabeth in the King's treatment.

For the faster His Majesty heals, the quicker Yohan will be relieved of his duties.

In the middle of the cottage, beneath the early morning light, Yohan embraces Sol. The knight's arms shield him from the world. Though Sol finds himself missing life at Featherlaine sometimes, and he hopes Androcles fares well, he has gotten used to this: spending the days and the nights by Yohan's side.

Yet, still, sometimes there are moments in which he remains unaccustomed to their proximity. Whenever Sol does not hear Yohan coming into a room he still finds himself jolting as he tenses, his heart a wardrum in his ribcage.

Days ago, when Yohan had just returned from his duties, Sol *should* have heard him entering as he'd wrung open the door—Yohan was far from quiet—but Sol was engrossed in a book that night. And when his beloved came to gently hold his hand as he so often tended to do, *at Sol's request, even...* the knight surprised Sol without meaning to, the mere act of suddenly being touched without warning found Sol screaming, then in tears.

They agreed then, that Yohan would always announce himself from now on. But it was a hard lesson to learn, that even when his mind knows it is fine, *that he is safe*, his body remembers the ways in which Sol was betrayed—it will not let him forget with ease. If it weren't for Yohan's gentle reassurance on the worst of days, Sol would have continued to believe part of him was broken—however his beloved always finds a way to show him he is more than his past.

And lately, Sol has started to believe that.

Because no matter how many storms they brace together, in the end, there is always light.

There is always love.

And, today, is a good day. Sol had a dream where he and Yohan returned home. It had been a few months, and the teahouse was open, and they were thriving.

He awakens. The room is pale blue and violet when he blinks then rolls over to find Yohan laying there, rousing from his slumber as he smiles at Sol. "Sleep well?" he asks.

And Sol reaches for his hand that he brings to his lips; Yohan's grin is contagious. "Always, when I'm beside you."

Yohan's thumb finds his lower lip that he traces softly with a hum. He leans forward to kiss Sol's forehead. "It is the same for me." The low, rumble in his voice stirs a certain warmth inside Sol, who shuffles closer to his beloved, the weight of his palm now rested against Yohan's waist. "Sol, my love," Yohan pulls him in closer; it is such a comfortable, peaceful morning. The air is still, all except for the knight's breaths which fall, heavy and hot against Sol's neck. "What do you want to do?"

"I want to be close to you," Sol mumbles as he buries his face in the crook of Yohan's shoulder, the knight chuckles.

"How close?"

A relaxed groan leaves Sol's lips. He chuckles, then guides Yohan's big, warm hand to his stomach, until the knight's fingers slip beneath his own tunic.

"Oh." Yohan runs his fingers up Sol's spine, and Sol can hear him smiling. "I see."

Sol's breaths quicken then grow heavy at the touch, his knees tremble with desire. And Yohan kisses his temple. He deepens their embrace, still. "Are you certain, my heart?"

"Yes." Sol's skin burns with desire. As he holds onto Yohan, he clutches at the chemise covering his knight's back, then whispers, "I want to be touched."

A chuckle leaves his beloved's lips, "Then I shall touch you, darling." Yohan briefly pushes up against his own elbow to close the gingham curtains above their heads, only but a streak of rising golden light remains, splitting the room in a bright line of warmth.

When Sol's eyes catch onto Yohan's hip that peeks out from beneath his night clothes, Sol presses his lips there, he runs his teeth across pale skin, grazing the knight's hipbone with a chuckle. He knows they could stay under the covers to do this, but the air is already hot as the sun begins to settle in the sky, and considering what they are about to do... Sol holds no doubt the temperature is about to rise again.

He shuffles closer to the bed's edgeside, and sits. Yohan raises a brow at him for a moment, though, he soon follows suit—the knight kneels between Sol's legs, he tips his head, until his cheek rests against Sol's thigh. "Yohan," Sol echoes again as he observes the knight through lidded eyes, he runs his fingers through Yohan's hair. "Can I keep my tunic on?"

Yohan nods. "Of course, my love." He shows Sol a gentle smile. "Sol, I love you."

Sol peers down at him, his eyelashes fluttering, he rests a hand against his knight's shoulder then leans down to kiss him. "Love you, too..."

As Yohan rests a hand against Sol's cheek and cradles it gently, he asks Sol through heavy breaths, "Can I sit behind you, sweetheart?"

Sol thinks for a moment. Eventually, he says, "Only if I can see you," his voice is soft and lowered, spreading thin amid sounds of the early morning, that slip in through the room from the outside world.

Yohan turns his head to glimpse at the tall, oval mirror held up by an aging, wooden frame posed right where the mattress ends. "Would that work?" he asks Sol.

Outside the cottage, the sun rises higher in the sky, glowing amber slashes split the room in two as the daylight glows brighter. Sol purses his lips together—never in his lifetime would he have thought himself the type to consider such an offer. Yet, here he is, filled with a newfound confidence that makes him want to sink into sweet decadence with his beloved. Sol's mouth shapes into the word, "Okay." And then, he dips his weight forward, until he is hugging Yohan's back, holding him close. "But I want you someplace different," Sol whispers into the knight's ear, and Yohan's finger twitches against his thigh. "I want, to be taken by you from behind..."

Sol can feel the knight's breathing quickening against his chest. "Sol," Sol's name is but a gasp on Yohan's lips as his curve into a smile.

“Yes, Yohan?”

Yohan leans in to hold him, then hugs him back. “I’m merely...worried about hurting you. And we ran out of oil last month...”

“Oh. I...” A pink, bashful burn slips into Sol’s cheeks. “I have...” He nuzzles his nose into Yohan’s shoulder, his words melting into a mumbled mess. “I have everything we need.”

Becoming an apothecary has its surprising perks in times like these—knowing they wouldn’t return to the city anytime soon, Sol took it upon himself to craft his own oils for the occasion, in case they’d ever have need for them again.

Though... he didn’t think that need would come so quickly.

There is another moment of silence between them, in which Sol hears Yohan swallow, hard. “I see.” Sol can practically hear the tension in the knight’s jaw. “Then, let us try.”

Sol points Yohan toward his bedside drawer, where the oils remain in the same place he left them, when he first tried them alone amid a solitary crepuscule; Yohan was not home for the week, and the scent of him in Sol’s bed had become too much for Sol to bear without his beloved around. He’d pleased himself inside their unwashed sheets, wished it had been the knight’s fingers circling the perk of his manhood, instead of his own. “Don’t worry,” Sol tells Yohan as the knight eyes the small vial with a certain wariness in his eyes. “It’s only coconut oil mixed with... a few other things that might help.”

“And you’ve tried it before, yes?” the knight asks as he smears a bit on the tips of his fingers and gives it a whiff.

“Yohan, I—” Sol sighs as he stares at his lover again and groans. “I made it myself...”

Yohan’s lower lip twitches. “Ah.” He pauses, before he adds, “That’s very resourceful of you, my love.”

“T-Thanks...” Sol clears his throat as he averts his gaze. “Do you need any help?”

Help with what? Sol thinks as he curses himself for blurting the words just to fill the silence between them. *Yohan clearly knows how lubricant works.*

“Thank you, but”—Yohan rubs his fingers together, then stares down at them as he tests the oil, he smiles at Sol—“I think I will be all right.”

Cordial as always, Sol thinks, whilst he internally thanks Yohan for not making this more awkward than it needed to be.

Soon, Yohan returns to kneel between Sol's legs. Sol loves the sight of him like this—*attentive, subservient, his*.

"May I?" Yohan asks, before he gently tugs on the waistband of Sol's breeches.

And Sol lets him. "*Please*." His breaths shake when Yohan dips his head forward, until his lips have disappeared between Sol's thighs. Yohan suckles on his cock. He makes Sol whimper and beg and thread his fingers through his hair. "Yohan." Yohan kisses up then down Sol's wet heat, he drags his tongue, softly, across Sol's pussy. And Sol lifts his knees then wraps his legs around Yohan's shoulders. He is soaked, wet and aching as Yohan sucks on him again. "*Yohan*." Sol can feel that he is close to the sun, to deliverance, and Yohan grunts, his voice low and wild as he sucks Sol to completion.

"*A-Ah!*" Sol comes with his thighs trembling around Yohan's head—even in his climax, the knight wraps his arms around Sol's waist and holds him as close as they can be.

When it is over, and Yohan pulls away, Sol looks to him—dazed—when Yohan rises to take a seat behind Sol's back again. Sol is breathless. Still, he arches into him, his spine aligning with the knight's chest that rises and falls with arousal, too. Their body heat and desires melt together into warmth. Sol reaches behind himself to grasp Yohan's hand that he squeezes, softly.

Yohan kisses the back of his neck. "I'll be gentle," he whispers. And Sol believes him. Always.

As Yohan slips his palms underneath the curve of Sol's backside, he pours oil onto his fingers. The knight massages wet, hot circles into Sol's ass. "*Sol*," he kisses Sol's ear with a throaty growl, "I can't wait to have you, my love."

Sol's mind sinks into endless pleasure as Yohan's fingers sink into him. "Oh, *Gods*, that's *good*." Sol whimpers, then tilts his head on instinct, catches a brief glimpse of himself and the knight in the mirror—Sol's lips quiver, his face is flushed deep rose tones that match the color of his swollen cunt. Yohan is opening him up, fucking him like he has always want to be fucked, and Sol relishes in every second of it.

This love.

The divine.

Yohan's mouth finds its way beside Sol's ear, and Sol feels the warmth of a low chuckle brush his skin. "My darling, you are so tense, *here*." And Sol bites into his lower lip. "Relax." He does his best to relax around the spread of his beloved's fingers, sliding into his heat. "My love," Yohan leaves kisses down Sol's neck. He runs his lips across Sol's shoulder. "*Breathe*." And Sol breathes. He throws his head back, against Yohan's shoulder as he grips at the knight's arms. He relinquishes control. *All of it for a single, brief second*. And, Gods, how silent it is in his mind for once.

How good it feels to trust.

"O-Oh—" It is embarrassing to hear himself moan like this, but Sol cannot hold the sound back. The way Yohan takes him, teases his entrance before fucking into him again, Sol *wants* to be touched, he *wants* Yohan to circle around his cock again, he wants Yohan. Yohan. *Yohan*.

"Yohan," he whines, "take me—put it in, *please*."

Upon hearing Sol's mumbled request, Yohan hums. His tone is playful. "Ah?" Yohan presses his lips to the back of Sol's head again. With his free hand, he unbuckles his own belt, and lets his cock spring free between Sol's ass. "But will I fit?"

Sol stares downward before he gulps at the sight of Yohan's cock. His beloved is... *big*, and his size is even more evident when Yohan is pressed to Sol's pussy. Yohan twitches against him, and Sol finds himself grinding down softly against the tip of his beloved's cock. "F-Fuck—" Sol bites his lip, his eyes roll to the back of his head. "Want you—" he gasps as the warmth of Yohan's come spreading across his pussy grants him sweet, temporary relief. "I want you, Yohan."

"Patience, Sol." Yohan's gaze is gentle, mellow in the mirror's reflection as he stares right into Sol's eyes. "You can hold on for me, right, sweetheart?" Yohan whispers before he pushes a third digit into Sol's ass—he nibbles on Sol's ear, and Sol thrusts his hips forward on instinct as he shuts his eyes. "Just a little longer," Yohan hushes him. "I want to be gentle with you." And Sol whines and clenches around his fingers, when the knight runs his free hand past Sol's chemise then up Sol's back, Sol shivers.

He hiccups a moan. “O-Okay, I’ll t-try—” And he feels Yohan smile against him.

“That’s my man,” the knight chuckles, he peppers kisses down Sol’s neck. “You’re doing so well, *Sol*.” Yohan scissoring his fingers inside him. “Can you feel how loose you’re becoming around me, my love?” He sucks on Sol’s skin. “I’m certain you’ll feel divine.”

Tears of pleasure blur Sol’s vision. “Y-You’re talkative today…” he mumbles, as he bites down on a hiss once Yohan continues to move. “Oh, Gods…”

“Am I?” Yohan chuckles. “Well,” he sighs into Sol’s skin, “I thought it may be helpful.”

“H-Helpful?” Sol’s eyes flutter open, when Yohan’s fingers leave him.

“Yes,” Yohan urges Sol to look at him from over his shoulder, he kisses Sol, long, lovely and slow. “You wanted to see me… I assumed hearing it is me could be of some reassurance.” Yohan brushes the hair out of Sol’s gaze with his free hand. “My heart,” he asks, “was I wrong to assume?”

“No, I—” Sol’s breaths hitch when he accidentally shifts against Yohan’s cock. “I..like it, hearing your voice.”

His words find Yohan grinning. The knight’s lips brush against Sol’s cheek in a soft peck. “In that case, I won’t ever stop talking,” Yohan jests as he laughs then kisses Sol’s lips now. And never will Sol get enough of the way his beloved’s mouth moves against his, it so good, so holy, so *right*.

“My heart?” Yohan presses a soft kiss to Sol’s eyelid before he pauses. “Shall I fuck you now?” he asks, and Sol doesn’t know how his beloved can sound so level-headed whilst speaking such words, but the offer goes straight to his cunt as Sol clenches around the air, he groans with impatience, excitement.

A soft, small laugh slips past his lips. Sol leans back against the knight and tilts his head until it rests against his shoulder. He lowers his voice to a whisper. He grins. “Fuck me, Yohan.”

There is an audible weight to Yohan’s breaths as Sol’s words fall amid the silence. Yohan reaches around to cup the underside of Sol’s knees—and *Sol cannot help but notice, how careful the knight is being to avoid his thighs, his heart is grateful for his consideration.*

Yohan lifts Sol slightly, and Sol leans back, against the knight’s chest. He gulps, then takes a deep breath. Soon, Yohan is rocking his hips forward, softly

burying himself inside Sol's warmth.

The heat of his beloved's cock spreading slowly inside him has Sol whimpering—there is a burn, but no pain. The feel of having him *here* is an overwhelming tightness, like nothing Sol has ever felt before. And even after all the time the knight spent preparing him, Sol is barely able to take most of his cock. *He understands now, why Yohan urged him to wait a little longer.* “Oh—” Sol's pupils widen as his tears line his eyes, he stares up to the ceiling, his lips agape. “Oh, f-fuck—” Sol almost chokes on the word. “So big—”

Yohan brushes the sweat-soaked hair back from Sol's forehead.” What are you talking about, darling?” he mouths the words beside Sol's temple and kisses him there with a chuckle. “I haven't changed at all since last time.”

“It feels different though,” Sol's words are slightly slurred as he averts his gaze and buries his face into the crook of Yohan's arm. “Go slow,” he mumbles against the knight's skin. “Please...”

“Of course, my heart,” the low, rumble of Yohan's voice reverberates against Sol's neck. The knight eases himself into him gently, slowly, until he is fully sheathed inside Sol's heat.

And Sol's eyes roll to the back of his head. “Oh, *Gods.*” He bites into his lower lip then moans, rocking back on instinct against Yohan's cock. They have barely begun, and yet, he is already seeing stars. “Yohan. Yohan. *Yohan, I—*”

Yohan's breaths are hot as they fall atop his skin. “My love, is it too much?”

Sol shakes his head. *He wants to talk, but right now, this is all he can muster—he is too busy sinking into the feeling of Yohan's cock, Yohan's chest arched around his spine like a large shield, his arms wrapped around Sol's—*

“Ah.” Yohan's grin seeps into a soft, gentle hum. “Then, does it feel good for you, dearest?” he lowers his voice, and then, his hand hikes up the back of Sol's tunic once more. “Would you like me to move? Tell me,” Yohan kisses Sol's cheek, “my handsome, darling man.”

Sol's face is hot at the compliment; though they are not facing each other, he feels the need to avert his gaze. “I love you,” he tells Yohan in a mumble, and then, “Y-You can move, n-no need to wait...”

The knight hums as he tucks Sol's hair behind his ear, then kisses the crown of his head. “All right, my sweet,” he whispers, “I love you, too.” He thrusts, once—and Sol's breaths catch in his throat. The hot drag of Yohan's cock inside him

finds Sol whimpering. Sol's mouth parts, a trickle of saliva slips down his lip. "*F-Fuck—*"

"My love," Yohan's heated breaths caress Sol's nape. "Breathe."

As Sol hiccups another whimper, he grabs hold of Yohan's hands then hisses the words, "*More. Please.*"

And Yohan can only oblige. He buries himself, deeper in Sol's warmth. He cups the underside of Sol's chin and guides Sol's attention towards the mirror again—*towards them.*

"Do you want to look, Sol?" Yohan mutters and Sol's gaze returns to the mirror, he watches the knight's cock slipping inside his ass, easy and slow. "Look at how gorgeous you are, my heart," he speaks the words hushed like a prayer. "You deserve everything, too."

Oh, Sol thinks while his chest warms with a gentle heat—echoes of the words he'd whispered when he'd made love to Yohan flutter through his mind, Yohan remembered.

As he finds the courage to *look* properly, he cannot take his eyes off the mirror. *Off himself—because for once, he does not loathe his body, it is a vessel for love and loving. And, Gods, how he wants to cling to the feeling.*

Yohan's warm palm comes to rest beneath Sol's neck, atop his heart. *In this moment, Sol is overwhelmed with an undeniable truth, a feeling that perhaps, he and Yohan do deserve this.*

Perhaps, it is okay for them to want again.

Perhaps, they can be more than their past.

"S-So hot..." Sol mumbles, to Yohan, and to himself.

The knight kisses his temple as he continues to fuck into him. "You, too, my my heart," he whispers. "I am in love with you, *so deeply, I swear.*" He holds Sol closer to his chest, and Sol's head falls back as he hiccups with pleasure; the knight's low voice reverberates against his skin. "With your body, your soul—*you are perfection, Sol.*"

Sol's eyes falter to himself again. *How wonderful it is, he thinks as he smiles, to get to know one's self again in the safety of Yohan's arms.* His attention drifts to Yohan, who is looking at him, with adoration in his gaze. He smiles. "I love you, too."

Despite most of his figure remaining unchanged, no traces of Solange remain in the reflection that stares back at him, there is only Sol—a young man rebuilt out of the ashes of a life he'd always felt numb to. Yohan's hand hikes up his tunic and finds Sol's bare heart that beats into his palm, the knight presses his lips to Sol's nape. Tears line Sol's eyes as he trembles and grinds his hips down against his beloved's cock. *He wants this—has never wanted so much in his life—to hold on to this odd, fluttering hope at happiness that has filled his soul like Yohan's cock fills his body with a soft, loving worship.*

Rebirth, Sol thinks as his gaze meets with the ceiling that glows orange with sunlit rays.

That's what this feels like.

"Sol..." Yohan whispers. "You're shaking, my love."

"I-I merely—" Sol snuffles, before he quickly wipes the tears that blur his vision away. "This is..." He takes a deep breath, then places his hand over Yohan's knuckles. "All my life, I felt as though—no matter what I did—I would never be enough," Sol peers back into himself, at his reflection being held, being loved by Yohan. He doesn't mean to sound so choked up when he speaks, yet he cannot help it. "But you make me feel like I am enough, Yohan."

Sol squeezes at Yohan's hand, he smiles as another tear of joy streams down his jaw. "Thank you."

I finally feel like I am myself.

Like I am a person, and I'll be okay.

"I'm glad, Sol." Yohan's grin is warm as he wraps the brave strength of his arms around Sol and kisses the fabric over his shoulder, then brings Sol's knuckles to his lips—their gazes meet in the mirror. "You'll always be enough for me."

The ends of Sol's lip jerk upward as his brows arch. He lifts himself up, all trembling legs and heavy breaths again, as Yohan's cock slips out of him; Sol turns to embrace Yohan, his arms wound tightly around the knight's shoulders, he buries his face into his beloved's shoulder, then asks him, "Can we finish like this?"

Yohan's hand finds his spine once more. "Yes." There is a fondness in his tone. "My darling." His cock nudges Sol's ass until Sol is pulling him in again, clenching around the slick, wet edge of his manhood.

And, *Gods*, how Sol yearns to revel in this bliss a little while longer, he feels as though he is floating, how divine would it be to stay here forever, *like this*; Yohan runs nimble fingers up Sol's skin, he rubs his back before he fucks into Sol's tightening heat, the act draws another moan, a whimper from Sol's lips.

And Sol tenses—his hands grasp at the space above Yohan's deltoids. His eyes widen, he heaves in a breath, then chokes around Yohan's name. "O-Oh—fuck, I—" The sweet emptiness of rapture, of being undone, eclipses Sol's mind until only Yohan's deep, generous thrusts pushing into his ass is all he knows for a soft, finite moment.

A strip of golden sunlight moves, it touches Sol's dark hair with pumpkin warmth. The air smells of sweat and pine, and the soaps they used last night in the cottage's shower. Yohan does not let go of him—not when he is spilling inside Sol's tight heat with his come, nor when he is grunting his name, as he thrusts and thrusts and thrusts into him—not even does he relinquish their embrace when Sol tells him he loves him again and the knight says it back.

Yohan grinds his hips in a way that quickens his pace, and with every thrust Sol is lost to the pleasure of his climax, to his knight's strength as he whimpers and moans, his eyes lidded, lined with tears. Sol stares up at the ceiling. The heat of the outside world touches him gently. A sole tear streams down to his cheek again. Amid the little cottage, beneath Yohan's strong, brave chest Sol feels connected to the world, the universe and its magic. There is a feeling inside his heart, thumping, that tells him he is safe.

Everything has led him to this, Sol realizes as he blinks; all the pain, the suffering, the long nights spent wondering what this life would ever amount to... *They made Sol find himself. And Yohan. And for this, he is grateful.*

Sol feels surrounded by an immense love—by every living being that ever came before and will come to pass after him. This feeling, this light, was always inside him—but it took the darkest of nights to wield it. *And now, the sun has finally risen again.*

Outside, the birds chirp songs of midsummer; Sol holds his beloved closer to his chest. "Thank you, Yohan," he whispers.

Thank you, for loving me.

* * *

The sun sets over the land, casting glittering shimmers of ivory and crown gold that ripple across the water by the docks. Sol and Celestina stare out at the lake risen by the King's manor—today was their last day of treatment, at least, the last day Sol was set to work here.

Tomorrow, Sol will begin getting his plans in order, for the journey home. *But first—a playful smirk takes the apothecary's lips—it is time for a swim, and to linger in the enjoyment of their first afternoon off in a long while.*

Celestina stretches her arms to a sky cut in banners of peach clouds. She yawns. “What a start to the year that was, huh?” Her legs dangle off the pier. “But!” she huffs, and eventually her fingers find the old wood again; it is still damp from when a noblewoman's son went fishing earlier today. “It would seem as though His Majesty is out of the woods for good, now!” Celestina beams as she holds out her hand for Sol to shake. “Thank you again, Sol. You truly didn't have to stay behind for so long.”

Sol merely shrugs. *It is true that, in some ways, he lingered for more days than planned, however...* “It would have felt wrong to leave.”

Not to mention, Sol thinks, that would have meant leaving Yohan behind.

“Come now!” Celestina gives Sol a playful pat on the back. “No need to be *that* modest! You could have gone home months ago! And yet...” Celestina's smile reaches her eyes as she faces Sol with earnest gratitude bubbling in her gaze. “You helped us a lot. Thank you.”

Sol can't bring himself to tell her he merely wanted for Yohan's final mission to be over sooner, so that he would be freed at a faster rate. Aside from fearing His Majesty's wrath, Sol cares quite little for the King, knowing very well that most *if not all* of Yohan's scars were molded by that dreadful man.

He hates how easy it is to forget, sometimes, now that he is here surrounded by such peaceful sights. But taking the freedom of choice away from Yohan is something Sol will never forgive, not in his lifetime.

“Sol?”

“Oh. Right.” Sol clears his throat. “Right.” He hooks a hand around the back of his neck. “I helped, yes...” he echoes; Sol’s voice trails off as he lowers it, but another thought comes to mind. “If I’m being honest, Celestina...” Sol bites into his lower lip. “I’m not that selfless.” He is weighing his words carefully, however, part of him has a feeling he can trust her.

“Of course,” Celestina giggles. She brings a sole finger to the underside of her chin, then tilts her head. “Yohan, was it?”

“H-How—” Sol stops himself, he raises a hand in the air yet freezes mere seconds later. *Was he that obvious?*

Before he can find his words, Celestina speaks up again. “How did I know, you wonder?” She sounds rather cheerful, and lacking any judgment about the situation, Sol’s heart feels lighter for that. “I see the way you look at each other, Sol, only a fool wouldn’t notice.”

Now, it is Sol that finds himself laughing. “Are you implying this manor is full of fools?” he mutters, “because you are the only one who has noticed so far, I’ll have you know.”

“Maybe,” she hums with a shrug. “But he’s smitten with you, as you are with him. Whenever you are gone, I catch him looking for you, sometimes, by his side—if discretion was your goal, then you’ve both failed remarkably.”

Sol has scarcely heard Celestina being so talkative before, he wonders if this is good or bad news as she laughs again. “If no one has brought it up to you before, then, they are either too busy to notice. Or, too polite to even mention it. After all—” Celestina rolls her eyes, and there is a sudden, unexplainable annoyance that fills her gaze now. “It wouldn’t be the first time one of the King’s Riders got entangled with an apothecary.”

Sol blinks, above head the clouds chase each other in a strange, hypnotic dance. “Celestina,” he starts. “It... sounded as though you had someone in mind when saying that.” Sol’s voice is soft, tentative, he isn’t quite sure if it is all right to speak of this. But since they are on the subject, he cannot hold his curiosity from getting the betters of him.

Whatever happened to that Rider and their apothecary? he wonders. Do they still live to this day?

Or are they long gone, like most Riders are?

Celestina merely scoffs again as she turns away from him, one elbow rested against her knees, her chin flat atop her fist. Her dark skirt is splayed out atop her thighs like an odd giant medusa washed up on the shore. “I was thinking about myself.” Celestina sighs. Her shoulders rise then fall. “But my Rider died long ago, if you must know—he was nowhere close to retirement, not like Yohan. He was a fool.”

“I’m sure he loved you.”

She glances at Sol from over her shoulder, there is a bittersweet pain in her gaze. Still, she laughs. “I’m sure he loved the idea of me.”

Behind them, the sun’s touch filters in through the trees, spearing rays of goldlight through the fresh little green leaves.

“There is plenty of you to love without ideas, Celestina,” Sol blurts the words without truly thinking them through—but now he has said it, and it is too late.

She raises a brow at him. “That almost sounded like a confession.”

Sol groans then covers his face, as he lays down against the dock, Celestina joins him. And Sol huffs. “I merely...feel strangely at ease with you. It’s hard to explain. But I think...” Sol’s lips remain slightly parted as he looks her way, he smiles. “I think, after spending so long with you through spring and summer, that you are better than the idea I initially had of you. S-So, what I’m trying to say is—” Sol averts his gaze. “I’m sure anyone would have thought that, too.”

“Thanks.” Celestina sounds almost disinterested as she stares down to her nails, trimmed perfectly, despite her constant labor. “But, unfortunately, he wasn’t *anyone*—he was an idiot.” Celestina turns away from Sol again, and Sol wonders what sort of face she is making as her shoulders tense; Celestina hugs her knees closer to her chest. “And I loved him for it, even when...it was what ultimately led to his demise.”

The wind rises. Three birds chase after each other as they soar past them, then fly across the lake, towards the city. “You’re lucky,” Celestina tells Sol; she cannot even bring herself to smile anymore, it seems. “Lucky, that he is retiring soon.”

If only I had waited, too, the words Celestina likely wants to say hang between them like the souls of the Old King’s Cursed Riders, all gone too soon. “I’m sorry.” It feels like a pitiful thing to say, yet Sol can find no other words. “Really, I am.”

Celestina tilts her head until it is resting in the crook of her elbows, atop her knees, her hair dangles down her pale legs and catches the light. “Enough about me, Sol.” She blinks, wide-eyed, her face a sudden ghastly pale shade. “Tell me about you.”

Sol’s laughter is awkward. “You know me.” *It feels like she is peering into his mind. Into his heart.*

There is a presence about her now, that he could not feel before. *But it is almost overwhelming now.*

“I don’t know what keeps you up at night,” Celestina finally mutters.

“That’s—” Sol takes a deep breath, in, then out. “That is true, I suppose.” Now, it is his turn to kick at the water beneath their feet. He holds his breath.

And it is Celestina who exhales first, for Sol cannot find the courage to—because now it feels like time is starting again. Like they will have a conversation that may change him, for worse or for better.

Celestina allows herself to fall back—until she, too, is laying atop the dock. Across from Sol.

She looks to him, dead in the eye once more. “So?” Her lips seem too slow as she speaks. “Tell me.”

Sol purses his lips together, he tenses. He knows he could get up, in theory. He could walk away right now. But something is pulling him towards this conversation, as if it is destiny, a call he must answer. “The past,” he croaks as if the words are painful, just from the sole act of having them climb up his throat. “A lot has happened. A lot is happening. Sometimes I worry it is too much.”

Too much for me.

His mind is racing. His mind is racing. His mind is—

“Why would it be?”

Sol blinks. “I don’t—” *Know?* He catches himself before the word leaves him, because he knows, actually. Sol knows very well, and that is *exactly* what the problem is. He lightly pinches at Celestina’s sleeve then tries to reach for her Gift with his, but on the contrary to Yohan’s, hers does not reply to him. In fact, Sol finds himself letting go as if he’d been burned. There is something dark, a presence so terrifyingly malicious, that even briefly touching it was unbearable to him. *And yet, oddly, it also felt like it was protecting her.*

Sol's eyes widen. Celestina stares at him like nothing is amiss. "Yes?" she asks, in a tone so docile, so innocent, that he is starting to doubt what he'd felt.

"I..." Sol bites his lips, before parting them again. "I don't know if you want to hear this."

"Why not?"

Sol buries his face in his palms that brings to his face. He shuts his eyes. "It's not a pleasant story," the words come tumbling out of him despite himself. He *knows* it may not be wise, but he has repressed the truth in his heart for so long, the mere opportunity of being freed from this terrible, haunting secret is enough for Sol to start talking.

Besides... perhaps, he is truly seeing things: he had never sensed anything off about her before.

Celestina shifts against the damp wood. Her breaths are heavy as she briefly looks to the sky, then to the water across the lakeside. "Too unpleasant to tell?" she asks Sol.

And he considers her words for a moment. *Is it? Would it be? He has never, truly said the words aloud.* But he wonders, if he keeps holding them inside his heart, if they will ever truly leave him one day.

And so, even if it is painful, Sol parts his lips. "W-When I left to become a mage, there was someone I trusted—a professor—I trusted him so much." Celestina stays silent, yet Sol hears her hold her breaths.

Sol's eyes blur with tears. "I-I trusted him *too much*." Sol's throat tightens. "Sometimes... I wonder if it's my fault, if I shouldn't have—" Sol freezes. As he speaks, it is like —'s hands are on him again. "If only I had been more careful, then..." His lower lip trembles, the tears he'd been holding back fall. Sol chokes on the feeling of weakness that he hates so—of being *there* again, a young, trusting mage. "Maybe then, he wouldn't have forced himself onto me." Sol takes a deep, shaken breath. "I—" He does not know why, but now that he started to say it aloud, he cannot stop. It is all spilling out of him—all of these words he had kept inside—like a barely stitched wound gashing red. "We would always spent time together after lectures—he was brilliant, he would teach me things about my Gift, how to use it...I wanted nothing more than to follow in his footsteps. Until..." Sol's voice waivers, his fingers tremble against the dock. "Then, he—" He cannot say it.

There is silence. The sun sets above them; the sky is red. He does not know if Celestina will understand, perhaps, she will find it silly, but he feels the need to say it anyway, “I couldn’t go back.” Sol’s words are buried under his nervous breaths. “I couldn’t face him again. I couldn’t face anyone, because if this is what it took to become exalted as a mage, I didn’t think I could do it: so I ran. And sometimes...” Sol lowers his voice to a meek whisper. His throat tightens. “I feel like I am still running, even when it was years ago.”

It is the first time he has truly said it aloud. As much as it hurts and makes the past feel all so terribly real, *even more so now*—in other ways, wielding the truth has set him free. Those dreaded memories he’d been holding in for so long, the poison that had been burning him hollow, perhaps there is a future in which they will not have as much power to *hurt* as they once did over Sol.

“Can I hug you?”

“Oh—um.” Sol averts his gaze as he snuffles. “Sure?” On most days, he would have protested the hug, but right now, he appreciates the gesture—it feels as though his mind is drifting, like he could sink into the cold wet wood beneath them and drown without an anchor.

Celestina wraps her arm around his shoulders as she hugs him from the side; she smells of the ointments they made together today, a gentle reminder for Sol that time is still going. It has not stopped. He is still here. *He is not in the past. He is not—*

“You didn’t run away.” Celestina’s voice rips him out of his thoughts.

And Sol sighs, his brows arch upward with sorrow. “Didn’t I?” His voice cracks, it is shaking now, but he cannot help it. “It certainly feels like I did.”

Celestina gives Sol’s shoulders a reassuring squeeze. “You protected yourself in the ways you knew best, at the time, and there is nothing wrong with that.” She pauses, for a brief moment, and Sol listens to the birdsong—the peace that surrounds them. “Say,” Celestina starts again. “Does Yohan—”

“Know?” Sol shakes his head against her, and Celestina’s shirt soaks in his tears. “He knows, but not everything.” They are close, and there is that stench about her again that strikes him for a few finite seconds, that *strange, dark thing* that feels close to Yohan’s scent yet different. But it fades again, quickly gone in seconds. And Sol’s heart is too busy pouring the truth out into the air, for Sol to

pay it heed. “I’ve never told Yohan with words. Not properly, at least, but h-he —” Sol heaves in another breath. “Yohan understands.”

Celestina pauses for what may as well be a lifetime. “Am I the only one, then?”

“That I’ve told?” Sol forces out a laugh. His shoulders slump over. “Does it matter?”

“Not exactly...” She sighs, and her breaths fall against Sol’s shoulder. “Well, it changes things, a little.”

Sol scoffs again, bitter venom envelops his tone. “As if I’d want to tell my peers that one of their most renowned mages did... that, to me. Have I not been humiliated enough? Would they even believe me?” he croaks; even if he were to go back in time and tell them, it wouldn’t have made a difference. Sol doubts his past self would have wanted anything to do with the grounds on which his trust was gutted and spilled. He would never have stayed. And nobody could have stopped him.

All he wanted, was to forget.

“At first,” Sol whispers, “I wondered if I was overreacting...”

The emptiness Sol had once felt pierce his heart returns, just like on that very day: he had hated himself for feeling despair instead of fury, for still holding onto the memories he’d made with that man, for hoping he had misunderstood. *That was long ago, though.* Now, that feeling soon boils into fire, *rage.* “I felt so powerless.” Sol’s lip jerks downward. “I felt so *wronged.*” His eyes sting with tears again as his voice trembles. “It was all so—” *Violent.*

Emasculating.

I felt so small.

“How could he do that to me? I—” Sol sniffles as he stares down to his knees, to his tears staining the fabric of his robes in deep circles. “I n-never understood —”

Celestina’s grip tightens around his shoulders before she pulls away from him then meets Sol’s gaze. “He should be the one made to feel humiliated for doing that to his own student.” It is only now that Sol notices, she has been crying, too. “*Fuck, that bastard!*” This must be the first time he’s ever heard her swear, though, he can only agree with the sentiment.

“Yeah. That bastard!” Sol doesn’t know why he is suddenly laughing now, yet he wraps his arms around Celestina’s shoulders and hugs her again. Tightly. Sol surprises himself when he feels okay. The sky has paled. His soul is lighter in ways he cannot explain. “I’m grateful to you, Celestina—truly, I am. Thank you, I-I…” His voice trails off.

And Celestina gives him a soft, pat on the back before they let go of one another anew. Celestina reaches out to hold his hand in an effortless manner—it feels as if the wind could snap their point of contact in an instant, if it were to sway a tad too much. “Sol?” It only takes Celestina another peek into his eyes before she asks him, “Why does it look as though more troubles you?”

Sol is relieved to hear her voice again, he didn’t want to continue drowning in this silence. He wonders if all those years of working with so many different people have made Celestina just this good at reading others—or, if her talent for it has led her to the path she walks now. “After what you just shared with me, about your past I… was worried it would be—” Sol peers upward, and a black, fleeting fog swirls within Celestina’s eyes. He blinks. The vision is gone. “Insensitive to mention?” *What is going on today?* Sol wonders as his mind finally buzzes alight with questions, because this does not feel like a mere coincidence or trick of the light anymore.

Could it be a curse of some sort?

But, as familiar as this feels to Yohan’s curse, she is not a Rider.

“Nonsense, I am asking, after all!” Celestina gives him a curt pat on the shoulder then looks him in the eye, with an earnest grin across her lips. Nothing about her is awry. She is as she always has been.

Odd, Sol thinks, he makes a mental note to keep watch of anything else—if this carries on, he may need to tell her, or Yohan. Perhaps, something is wrong with his Gift. *Perhaps, this is something else entirely.*

“I like hearing about people’s problems!” Celestina presses her hands together then shuts her eyes with a shrug. “They make mine feel less important, you see—it’s nice, to have something to concentrate on other than that noise in my head.” She peers into his gaze again, there are no shadows to be found, and yet it feels as though she is looking right through him. “People are *fascinating*.”

Sol stares at her, deadpan, before he looks away. “Ah…” He initially assumed she was doing this out of sheer good-will. “I see.” *Not that it changes much, at this*

point, but... he does wonder if this is what Celestina had in mind when she'd mentioned the supposed-idea that others have of her. Though, he does not like her any less for it. She is a great healer and a scholar with a keen eye; he's never met anyone quite like her—and every genius he'd crossed in his lifetime often thought in wayward ways...

What harm would it do to share more? "I'm often tense around him," Sol eventually tells her, though, he is a tad more interested in her mystery than the subject at hand now. He can't help but feel as if he is missing something, a detail, that would give sense to everything he has seen and heard today. "I feel guilty. Yohan's done nothing wrong—*nothing* to remind me of those things I do not want to think about. Yet... my mind *always* wanders back to that dreaded time..."

Celestina raises a brow at him. "*Always?* I find that hard to believe."

"I..." Sol sighs. "Fine, not always." He pushes up against his palms and sits once more. "But it happens enough for me to notice." Sol stares down at Celestina, who is still laying across the dock, her arms crossed over the velvet fabric that sits atop her stomach. "And enough for Yohan to notice, too... He is so patient with me, Celestina, I worry I may hurt him, if things remain this way."

Celestina reaches for the amber, darkened sky and huffs. "It's normal to have scars, Sol." She tilts her head until their eyes meet, hers carries a silver sheen now, and Sol is too transfixed to even say a word. "Tell him how you feel—open your heart to your lover, and he will open his to you." She grins. "Maybe you will find that you are not so different, after all."

"Thanks, Celestina," he smiles back. "I..." The silver in Celestina's pupils shifts to ivory, and then pure oblivion once more. Sol blinks. "I will..." he mutters as he tries his best to remain calm, but the presence is not leaving this time.

It is real.

All of it.

Sol's heart thumps loud in his ribcage. His mind latches onto every piece of magic, every curse and legend he has ever studied—yet, nothing comes to mind. And as similar as this presence feels to Yohan's predicament, her malediction is of a different kind. It does not carry the reek that the Riders carry. *It does not fill her with the fear that he senses from Yohan on the daily.*

“Celestina,” Sol speaks her name slowly, before he parts his lips again. “There’s something I’d like to—”

The sudden noise of grass crunching beneath hooves fills the air amid the gardens and devours Sol’s question. When Sol turns to meet the sound, a tall stallion plunges him and Celestina in the darkness of its shadow—riding the steed, is no other than Yohan.

Yohan is not riding one of the Old King’s cursed horses, he notes, but one he remembers from the residence’s stables. The horse seems to have taken a liking to Yohan, this is not the first time Sol has seen them together across the manor’s fields. Sol’s gaze briefly flashes to where Celestina lays: she has returned to her old self—whatever is haunting her, does not seem intent on harming—in fact, Sol worries now that bringing notice to it could do more harm than healing. Certain curses and spirits only kill once their host is made aware of their existence... maybe, it would be best to leave this be.

At least, for now.

“Sol! Celestina!” Yohan calls out as he waves to them.

Sol glances up at his beloved anew—he is handsome, as always. Though, the lines beneath his eyes are stronger than usual; Yohan has been in the midst of his preparations for his retirement, lately, and it seems today was a long day.

It is quite possible this afternoon marks the beginning of their journey back to Featherlaine.

Despite the stallion being of an impressive stature, Yohan dismounts him with ease. He ties the horse to a nearby apple tree, and as Sol strides up to him, Celestina trails him not too far behind.

The forest that surrounds the meadow around them is peaceful, as are the winds carrying fallen petals and strange little insects across its gentle breeze—if Sol concentrates hard enough, he can hear the sloshing of water near his feet, yet right now he is transfixed by the knight who has taken his hand between his, and holds it like it is a precious piece of himself. When Yohan spots Celestina in the corner of his eye, he tenses and starts to pull away.

But Sol smiles. “It’s okay,” he tells his beloved, as if to give Yohan permission to stop pretending they do not go to bed together every night, and fill each other’s cup every day at breakfast on dawn’s cusp. “Celestina knows.”

It is all Sol needs to say before he is running, into the knight's arms for a brief few seconds. He finds respite in their embrace.

The afternoon's weight, too, dawns on Sol—though he was laying on the pier during the majority of it, his talk with Celestina took so much out of him, Sol feels like he could sleep for eons.

When he and Yohan pull away, the grass beneath their feet is all ivory and orange reflections from the dying sun. "I will be right with you in a minute," Yohan whispers, before he presses a kiss to Sol's forehead then excuses himself to lead his stallion towards an apple tree, where he ties him there beneath the shade for the time being.

As Sol watches him, dazed by his charms, Celestina whistles. "*Gods*, he really cares about you."

Sol's lip twitches, as do his fingers by his sides, whilst he continues to observe Yohan from afar and tries to keep his composure. "W-Why do you say that?"

"He is so soft with you, and tender... it is rare to see someone love like him." Celestina pats Sol on the shoulder with an envious sigh. "I think you've nothing to worry about, Sol. Truly."

Celestina's words sit in the air between them for a few seconds.

Sol parts his lips as he ponders on their meaning. *Nothing to worry about*—Sol tugs at the fabric of his robe as he looks downward to his feet, his heart a nervous wreck, his face warms and flushes with a crimson pink shade—is *that* right?

Yohan returns to them not long after with his brows furrowed in confusion. "Hold on," he mutters, "now that I'm getting a good look at you, why is your hair wet?" he asks the two, while his attention shifts between Celestina and Sol, who had still been laying on the dock mere minutes ago.

But Celestina merely waves his words away. "Long story." She winks at Sol. "Maybe Sol will tell you later if he wants to—but right now," she cheers, "you've promised me a swim!"

"Ah." Yohan leans down to kiss Sol's cheek. He chuckles. "In that case, I'll keep my curiosity at bay, my love."

"L-Let's just go already." Sol didn't think his face could burn any hotter, however the universe proves him wrong when Yohan wraps an arm around his

waist, his palm is so big and perfect wound around his hip. Sol's ears warm.

The three of them walk towards the lakeside, leaving footsteps on the pier over dark smudges of human-like shapes, Celestina and Sol left whilst they had laid across the elder wood. Celestina tiptoes towards the edge that creaks under her feet, then, she yanks off her dress over her shoulders.

Sol has barely had a moment to blink before she has also taken her undergarments off, too, and dove into the lake. "Are you coming?" Celestina calls out to them with a wave as she kicks her feet beneath the water; Sol remembers the conversation they'd had right before the spring ended, how Celestina had admitted to coming here for swims whenever life became too much to bear and she needed a moment to stop thinking—to be one with the water and the lands surrounding them.

It seems she was not lying when she'd promised to show him, to *introduce* Sol to the lakeside wonders of the King's estate, once they had more time.

Sol doesn't reply with words, instead, he takes a small peek at Yohan from over his shoulder then shows him a smile full of nerves. *What a strange way to end his mission this is*, he thinks to himself, before he asks his beloved, "Shall we?"

As Sol peers down to Celestina once more, he scarcely believes he is on the verge of doing this unthinkable act, but the water is enticing—reflecting peach violets across its surface like liquid candy warmed by the summer sun, gold specks dance at the tip of each small ripple—and all he wants to do is jump.

And he will.

He does.

He gives Yohan a knowing look and takes his hand with a roguish smirk.

Yohan returns his expression then rids himself of his armor. And as Sol sheds the robe's satin from his skin in turn, they dive.

For a moment they are comets in the water, odd disruptions bubbling amid the lake's quiet surface—until the two of them surface once more and breathe the fresh air in, the fragrance of the flowers and trees all around.

Soon, the lake returns to how it was before, unmoving—*still*—as if they had never even jumped. And Sol wonders if this is what it is like to die. And to be rebirthed.

Celestina splashes water their way.

It isn't long before the three of them are playing quite the childish games.

Their laughter dances in the air. And in that brief pocket of the afternoon, they are eternal—Sol feels as though nothing could stop him anymore. He has tasted too much love, *too much life*, to leave himself behind again.

They plunge into the blue. Underneath the water the three of them hold hands and look to one another. For a brief second, Sol tastes something bitter against his tongue, an act of missing someone that has not even begun. They play amongst themselves for another hour, without a care nor worry for the time of day. As a curtain of stars greet the rising dusk, Celestina is the first to speak. “I’ll be missing you,” she tells the two of them. “Things haven’t been this lively since...” she stares down to the water, now stripped of any pinks, she laughs with a sigh. “*Gods* only know when.” There is a deep, loneliness and longing etched in Celestina’s voice.

Sol squeezes at her hand, and at the same time, he feels Yohan’s palm tighten around his own fingers. Silent farewells linger in the air between them, and Sol’s teeth find his lower lip as he thinks back to the Spring he spent here—growing, learning more and more each day about new medicinal recipes from Celestina’s teachings, himself, and patience... *How many days did he spend cooped up on rainy afternoons in the old gardener’s cottage, in the warm embrace of Yohan’s arms?* he wonders. And tears line the edges of his eyes. Sol isn’t sure if either of his comrades notice, when his heartbreak drops into the water in such a small, insignificant way it barely lands a ripple.

In truth, Sol does not want to go. As much as he despises the King, he loves the people here, the scenery, the sunrises...he’s never wanted to stay so badly in his life. Still, he knows his place isn’t here—*perhaps, in another life it could have been*, but certainly not in this one.

And Sol would not want it another way, yet he merely wishes...he could exist in two lands, two timelines at once, because then it would not hurt this much. *Then, he would not have to say goodbye.*

They swim towards one another, and hold one another. Even though Yohan tells Celestina she must come visit his tea house next year, “*I’d be more than happy to have you,*” Sol knows it is a lie—once they leave, Yohan will not be coming back here again, nor will Celestina leave the King’s side; she has made that part clear enough in the past.

The sun sets, and the three of them are forced to pluck themselves out of the water, yet one question remains on Sol's mind.

He wonders who Celestina is to Yohan.

And about what haunts her, truly.

Sol makes a silent promise to himself that he will try and understand once and for all before he departs, over his final days here at the manor, numbered 'til the middle of next week.

* * *

When the night has swallowed the sun and all is quiet Sol and Yohan linger by the pier's edge. Their legs dangle from over a wood plank as they sit shoulder-to-shoulder, their fingers twined like strong ivy, branches growing together in the soil.

Amid the darkness, out rise dead stars and souls, memories that so often lay dormant amid the core of this land's heart. "I think... I want to try using my Gift again," Sol says as he stares out to the little lights bound to villages across the lake, whose reflections slither into the water like thin strips of warm string being pulled apart, undone at their every seam.

Yohan squeezes his hand, as the two of them continue to observe the horizon, he asks Sol, "Are you certain?"

And a smile takes Sol's lips. "Yes," his voice is barely audible over the whispers of the celadon leaves above them, that brush together in a fleeting dance.

"Tonight?" Yohan looks to him, but Sol for once, does not look back.

"I would like to," he whispers, as the wind blows the hair out of their faces, Sol releases Yohan's hand. Finally, he turns, and their eyes meet. He flashes his beloved a grin full of delight, happiness of the purest kind.

Sol brings his hands to his chest, then makes two palms around a small nothingness, as if coddling the air. He closes his eyes and concentrates—not on the fear, but on the love he has been witness to and was given these past few months. *On everything that has made him feel so undeniably warm and at home in*

this world. Until that warmth frettles out then grows, pulsing, in the mid of his palms.

Sol's Gift fills the air abound with color—hot, brilliant sunflower golds. The loving heat illuminates Yohan's face. "Sol!" he gasps. "This is—"

"Light magic," Sol whispers. A tear slips his skin and he laughs so lightly that it is barely audible, *Ah, how silly it was to fear this, out of all things,* Sol thinks as he makes the orb turn into a fish of light above the lake with a swift, flick of his wrist.

Sol loses himself to the rhythm of his own magic, the fish turn to hordes of fireflies above the water, that sway under his control and leave trails of light across the water's darkness. He is in his element again—*free*—and no one, not a soul, can take this from him again.

The entirety of the lake's surface lights up alongside Sol's heart. And Sol lets his magic run free as he falls, into Yohan's arms. He is sobbing now—as trivial as it seems now, he'd been so afraid that his Gift had left him for good, *rarely has he felt anything stronger than the relief that hits him tonight like one large wave.*

The firefly lights catch onto the water and Yohan leans in to kiss him, chaste and slow. Sol rests his palms against the knight's heart. *He is so glad.* So, so glad that *this* was always here, resting and waiting inside him, for the time when he would be ready to embrace it again.

"It's beautiful," Yohan tells Sol, his breaths ghosting against Sol's lips, his fingers thumbing at Sol's jaw—he grins and Sol's heart soars. "You're beautiful."

They linger well after curfew, following the light Sol creates, that eventually leads them home.

* * *

The scent of mildew instills itself in the morning air as Sol slips out of the cottage without a sound.

A thick, gray fog has enveloped the land. For once, Yohan sleeps soundly; Sol wonders if he may have made love to him a tad too... intensely, last night.

As he reminisces on the trail of kisses he left down Yohan's neck—*how his beloved had moaned and begged for more*—Sol rushes down hillsides, making his way over to the King's manor in order to pick up his tools. And to bid a final farewell to Celestina, who is still watching over His Majesty's recovery.

To Sol's surprise—despite not having warned her about his visit in advance—Celestina is already waiting for him on the veranda when he arrives. Rain trickles down on bare rooftop, the pinpricks of droplet sounds bounce against ceramic, some meeting a ghastly end as they slide down the roof only to be squashed upon hitting the dirt ground.

"You seem to know a lot of things," he tells her, his face still, stoic as he blinks then observes her with the curiosity of wildcats observing lions.

"Is that so?" Celestina's newborn smile reaches her eyes, there is something unsettling, ancient about her features today. All the colors have been stripped from her face, as if she has not been touched by sunlight in years. "As always, you pick up on things quickly." Celestina tilts her head then chuckles. "What a good student."

"It's not as if you are trying to hide it," Sol whispers, as if an onlooker could overhear, even though they are the only two figures to be seen amid this vast, endless fog. "Who are you, really?" Sol does not break her gaze, not once. "A spirit? A Rider?" he asks her. "Who am I speaking to?"

"You don't want to know."

Sol stops for a moment. "I think you want me to know."

And she laughs. "Perhaps... It has been a while"—Celestina grasps at her elbow—"since I have properly told someone." She lowers her gaze with a sigh. "But the truth may weigh on you. Sometimes peeling back reality is more pain than it's worth."

"Does Yohan know?"

She nods.

Sol heaves in another breath as he strides up the veranda and their shoulders align for a brief instance. "Then," he utters, "I want to share this burden with him."

How much more hurting weighs on his beloved's shoulders? Sol wonders if he could at least relieve him of a scar. He makes his way over to the inside of the manor, its halls have been gutted of its staff today.

Behind him, Celestina follows, her steps tranquil despite the heaviness crawling through the air. “You are aware of the curse,” she tells Sol, and although Sol was not quite certain in which ways the two were connected, he isn’t surprised in the least that these are the words Celestina starts with.

“Are you like Yohan, then?” he asks her, as he enters the King’s empty study then leans down to grasp the remainder of his belongings that had briefly taken up space, life here.

“I wish I were.” She laughs, but in an empty, broken way.

And Sol freezes from where he’d been sorting his empty, collected vials. Now, he is lost. “What are you then?” *Lost, and a tad fearful.* “I sensed something on you. A presence. Something... it’s *more* than I can explain, but I feel it at times. I feel it *right now.*” Morbid curiosity fills his insides, and Sol’s eyes widen. He doesn’t know, but *he must, he must.* “If you aren’t like Yohan, then why does that *thing* feel so similar to the stench that follows him?”

A sigh filled with distant dreams and longing leaves Celestina’s lips, and she squeezes at her elbow. “Sol,” she whispers, her voice full of dread, yet acceptance nevertheless. “That’s because we *are* similar.” Their eyes meet again, and there is it once more, that strange dark fog which dances through her gaze. “I am the curse’s vessel,” Celestina tells him.

“Vessel?” Sol’s mind is emptied, then filled with a thousand questions. As he holds his breaths, *he does not understand, none of this makes sense.* “Aren’t Riders the *vessels*?” Sol stares at Celestina, worry afloat in his gaze. “If you *aren’t* one of them, then how—”

Celestina raises her fingers in the air. She twists her wrist, as if unraveling something—*herself*—from the world, and the cloak of illusions that had coated her skin melt away in dark splotches that leave shadows on the floor. *This* is the presence Sol had been feeling. *But it is so strong now, he does not even need to concentrate for his skin to be chilled, his throat to tighten.* Whatever lives inside her fills her with a magic so powerful, a stench so putrid, Sol knows if she were to attack him here he would not survive.

Celestina’s face morphs into that of the young woman’s from the painting; except, her eyes are void of light, full of oblivion and the monsters that keep children up at night. Dark tendrils of shadow that surround her reach out to Sol and touch the underside of his chin.

As Sol faces a presence he believed could only exist in legends, he braces himself for what may come next, he wonders if she will take him as Rider, too.

If this is how Riders are made.

“Celestina?” He is surprised by how calm he sounds as the words leave his lips, “Are you going to kill me?”

Celestina wanders around the room, circling Sol, with her palms clasped together behind her back—a trail of shadow follows behind her, a heavy cape of sorrow. “No.” She tilts her head to glance back at Sol from over her shoulder—although she is smiling, Celestina’s expression is all but bright. “I’m going to tell you a story, Sol.” An iridescent tear streams down her cheek, her eyes gloss over, reflecting the firelight like glass. “It is a story about my father—the *Old King*—who cursed his daughter to an eternal life of oblivion.”

* * *

Orange trails bleed from the sky into the fog when Sol leaves the manor with his tools in one hand, and a farewell in the other—Celestina’s story is still coursing into his mind.

I must live, if I want to destine all our surviving Riders to long and happy lives.

Sol passes the lakeside again, all of the color has been stripped from its water by the clouds above.

But for as long as I live, I must continue knighting new Riders—the curse is a hungry one, you see.

When Sol arrives at the cottage, he finds Yohan cooking supper in the kitchen. He walks to his lover with slow steps, then wraps his hands around his waist from behind, he holds his beloved a little tighter than usual.

And if I do not choose a Rider, it will choose for me—anyone in the land. But if I die, the curse will take over, it will become me; it has a will and I am its chains. So I choose and I pretend that I am who I say I am: a healer, a friend. And I bear this burden alone.

Yohan laughs as he ruffles Sol's hair. "Sol!" As he toils the pasta in the kitchen's pot, he kisses the crown of Sol's head. "What's gotten into you today, my love?" the knight asks, when he sees Sol refuse to let him go, sticking to him like a human-shaped mollusk.

I live, even when living seems to lose its meaning sometimes—for I know it still means something to the ones I doom to suffer with me.

Yohan turns around to take Sol into his arms. "Sol?" he whispers against Sol's shoulder whilst he leans down to deepen their embrace. "Sol? Why do you cry, my love?"

I live, because when they die, their memories live on inside me. And perhaps, it is selfish to hope they will make happy memories before the end comes—but I do.

"I love you so much, Yohan," Sol blurts, unable to hold back the ugly sob that escapes his lips and collides with Yohan's chest. "How glad I am that life brought me to you—brought *us* together—I hope you'll always remember."

Yohan runs his fingers through Sol's hair, where he kisses him again. There is a tear that falls atop Sol's cheek, spilled from the knight's gentle gaze. "I love you, too," he whispers as he thumbs at Sol's jaw, then brings his lips to Sol's. "I feel the same. Every day I wake grateful for you, my heart."

Sol, please take care of him for me.

"Yohan," Sol stares up at him, his mouth trembles, his heart pounds within his ears; he lowers his voice to a soft, almost-question, then holds on to the knight's shoulders in an earnest display. "Marry me."

Sol. Please, show him the light I took from his life for so long—he is a good man.

He deserves to be happy.

* * *

They depart from the manor before dawn has a chance at breaking the violet bruise of the morning sky.

"You didn't want to say goodbye?" Sol asks Yohan.

Yohan, who only looks to the dark horizon still peppered in stars as he sighs, grinning. “I think we already have.”

The two drag their belongings towards the stables. As they near, the cottage only gets smaller and smaller behind them, and Sol thinks he will miss it.

But, now, he is also looking forward to seeing Androcles again.

And Sol has a feeling the town that once felt so stifling, will fill him with a sense of familiar comfort once he returns to Featherlaine.

Yohan stops before the stallion he’d been riding a few days ago, he readies his steed—newly gifted to him by the crown—for their travels ahead. Not long after, the knight turns to Sol and tells him, “Let’s go.”

In his eyes, the flicker of freedom shines brighter than the setting stars. And they ride—until the stench of the curse that once remained so strongly on Yohan is but a flicker of deep oblivion in his bones. As the knight sheds the darkness from his heart the more they stray farther from the manor, the Old King’s Curse evaporates like steam off his skin.

It is a beautiful thing—a beautiful, lonesome *monstrous thing* to witness, when Sol watches the dark sparkling onyx trail they leave behind in fascination; Yohan’s nightmare is finally over.

The sun cracks warmth over their backs, summer’s final embrace. “Sol...” Yohan’s voice trembles in relief. “I cannot feel it anymore, I—” He looks to the sky, the rising dawn. “I think I am free.”

Sol’s grip tightens around his beloved’s waist. He buries his face into the knight’s back then shuts his eyes. “I’m glad, Yohan,” Sol whispers, even though he can still feel the remnants of a curse inside him, incubating something foul that will hatch inside the next Rider whose soul will be reaped. “I’m glad you do not feel it anymore.”

Soon, they are in the city again—back where it all started. “We should get a few provisions before we leave,” Yohan tells Sol, who is still holding onto him tightly.

He doesn’t want to let go.

Still, he nods against the knight’s back. “Sounds good.” He finally pulls away slightly, then opens his eyes, noticing now that a small crowd has gathered around Yohan’s great stallion—indeed, it makes sense, there aren’t many knights around this early in the day nor time of month.

As more curious faces stop to peek at them, Sol blinks, the townsfolk look so tiny from atop Yohan's horse. There are so many eyes on him, it's beginning to make him nervous. He leans in closer again to Yohan's back, until his face disappears, hidden behind Yohan's midnight-blue cape that flies in the wind like the pieces of his past he left behind today.

If Sol concentrates hard enough, he can hear Yohan's heartbeat. It is always a reassuring sound, a gentle reminder that this is not a dream, that they are alive *here* together in this moment. *Sol can touch Yohan.*

And Yohan can touch him.

Yohan clears his throat. "Excuse us," he tells the passersby, before he steers his steed toward a quieter part of town. "This should do it," he mutters the declaration to himself as he stops his horse; they come to an abrupt halt.

Yohan dismounts his horse first—as he lands he offers his hand to aid Sol, who gleefully takes it with a smile. "Thank you, beloved," he tells Yohan, as Yohan wraps his arm around Sol's waist then helps him down, Sol steals a kiss from his lips and giggles. Sol technically could have gotten off himself, he has done it before, but there is something enticing about having the knight's attention all to himself like this. *And it would seem Yohan has definitely figured it out.*

It is such a nice day today, Sol is excited to visit the city again, knowing they will make for Featherlaine once they are done.

As Yohan ties his mount to a nearby pillar, Sol eyes the horse with mild worry. "Will it be all right to leave him here alone?" he asks the knight. "What if someone tries to steal him?"

Yohan can only chuckle at the remark whilst he looks Sol in the eye with a devilish grin. "They better not, the poor souls; I'm quite good at finding people, and making them find regret."

"Yohan!" Sol gives the knight's arm a gentle, albeit playful tug, his voice trails off, "Please, don't..."

"I jest, dearest." Yohan wraps an arm around Sol's shoulders and pulls him in closer, until his lips are pressed to Sol's soft, chestnut hair. "Those days are behind me," he says, before his lips find Sol's ear in a teasing whisper. "I promise I'll be good."

Sol raises a brow at his beloved—as he glances up at him, he reaches for Yohan’s chin that he pinches between two of his fingers. An amorous smirk takes his lips when he thinks back to some of the nights they spent together. His gaze darkens with desire as his eyes meet with Yohan’s. “Will you, now?”

A light, pink flush spreads across Yohan’s cheeks—the knight is flustered, visibly so, as he blinks a few times in rapid succession then bites his lower lip, he glances down to Sol’s mouth. He leans in.

Yohan presses their lips together, he kisses Sol, so slowly that it feels as though the world stops spinning. And Sol runs his fingers through the knight’s hair, he finds himself laughing against his beloved’s skin. “*Gods*, how I love you.”

Sol slips his hand into Yohan’s, their fingers slot together in perfect ways, and he rests his head to the knight’s shoulder. Beside him, Yohan sighs, happily. “I love you,” he echoes the words. “Thank you for not leaving me, even when you could have... even when I would have waited.”

They stride through the early morning crowds again. Though they are not riding Yohan’s horse anymore, they still manage to stand out, merely from Yohan’s height and armor.

“I wouldn’t have left you, you know,” Sol eventually tells Yohan. “Not for anything.”

Yohan merely replies with another thankful nod, still—Sol notices the tears that line his eyes, the way the knight’s fingers tremble ever so slightly around his hand. “You don’t have to be alone again...” Sol adds, as he gives Yohan’s knuckles a gentle squeeze. The two look to each other again. And Sol smiles. “I’m here, remember? And I’m sure Featherlaine will love you just as much.”

“Thank you, Sol. I...” Yohan squeezes his hand in return. “I appreciate that. It is... easy to forget, that I am not the boy who cannot refuse them anymore, it... may take me some time before I can truly believe it.”

Sol pauses in his steps, causing Yohan to stop, too. “Sol?” Yohan glances at him from over his shoulder. “Are you all—”

Sol runs to embrace him. “I’m fine,” his voice croaks as he buries his face into the knight’s chest. “I’m fine, really, I am. I merely—” He takes another breath. “I’m glad you never gave up, and that the curse never took you, and that you are here now.”

Yohan's palm comes to rest atop the crown of his head. "Thank you, Sol." He presses his lips to Sol's hair. "I hope to make the best of it."

They remain there, lost to each other in the crowd for a short while, when Sol catches an odd scowl briefly knitting itself through Yohan's brows. He parts his lips to ask his knight if anything is the matter, until a voice calls out to them.

"Hey! Excuse me!" The question travels through whispers amid the sea of nearby villagers, swaying like the ocean's waves, Sol does not think he has heard this voice before. And yet, it sounds familiar in its way of speaking. "Solange! I *think* that's you—isn't it?"

A pit of dread instills itself in Sol's stomach. "Shit," he curses under his breath as he turns away then tries to drag Yohan away by the arm. "Yohan, we should—"

"Ah!" A sigh of relief travels through the air, towards them. "I'm so glad to see you, Solange! Some people were saying you were dead, thank the Gods!"

I sure felt that way, Sol thinks to himself, as his eyebrow twitches—still, the kindness mixed into the words cause him to pause. He grabs hold of his courage then faces the voice, instead of running. "Who..." Sol trails off as his eyes spot the voice's owner.

Before him stands a young woman. She reminds Sol of someone in all sorts of ways, yet, he cannot quite put his finger on whom. Despite that, they visibly know each other. *How?* Sol squints. *It isn't like him to forget someone so quickly, especially if they were close...*

The young woman forces a smile as she motions toward the streetside, where there are far less crowds and people walking. "Should we um, catch up in a quieter place?"

Sol glances to Yohan for approval—he doesn't necessarily *want* to catch up, it wouldn't kill him if he missed the opportunity, but he can't hide his curiosity—Sol parts his lips and blinks, blankly, as he asks the knight, "Do we have time?"

"I suppose?" Yohan hums as he stares up at the clocktower, before he turns back to Sol and the young woman. "As long as we don't linger too much, I don't see why not."

Sol isn't sure whether he is anxious or relieved at that revelation, however it is not long before the three of them are visiting a herbal and tea shop together. Sol is a tad grateful for the detour, he admits, he hadn't realized such a pleasant stop was in the vicinity.

He stares back at the young woman again, who is picking out herbs like she has lived here all her life without hesitation. “You graduated?” Sol asks her, because it is rare to see a student wandering alone on a weekday like this, especially one that seems to know the area with such an undoubtable sense of familiarity.

“Oh! Yes!” She perks up, lively like a little bird in flight. “A few months ago, actually!”

And as Sol watches her, it hits him: her mannerisms, her way of speaking, *everything reminds him of...* “You’re my old dormmate,” Sol blurts the thought aloud before he can even consider it.

The young woman’s lower lip quivers. “Ah, yes, I suppose I am.” Worry flashes through her gaze as she crosses her arms, the joy is plucked from her features, and only concern remains before she stares down to her feet. “Hope you don’t mind the change.” She glances out the window, at the crowds passing them by like the passing of time. “I’m Esther now.”

“Oh.” Sol’s eyes widen. He tries to hide his surprise, yet something about their encounter has him emotional. *He didn’t think he’d meet another person like him, especially not today considering he was just about to leave.* “N-No! Not at all!” Sol’s jaw tenses. As much as he is deeply delighted to see Esther again, now he remembers who she is, she is bringing up so many memories.

Bad memories.

The gnawing pit of anxiety in his stomach returns. And Sol’s mind is abuzz with dread. *But he takes a breath, reminds himself that he is safe. Yohan is here. They are in broad daylight. He is not alone.*

Nothing will happen.

Nothing will happen.

Sol clears his throat. “If I had judged you, then I would have judged myself, too, by the way.”

Esther’s eyes widen. “Oh, *Gods.*” Her face pales with horror. “I apologize! I-I knew you looked a bit... different, but I didn’t want to assume—”

Sol tugs at the cloak that’d been covering his robe until now, he shrugs. “No harm done, I’m just relieved you don’t hate me, either.”

There is a short, bout of silence that instills itself between them, until Esther sighs and shows him half a smile. “What a world we live in huh, if we must worry

about that?” Esther shakes her head. “Anyway, it’s seriously so good to see you again. And to meet you again, um...”

“Sol,” the name slips off his tongue as easy and as fast as breathing now. And as the conversation continues, nothing happens indeed, and Sol’s pulse finally slows.

Esther tilts her head. “Sol!” She hums as she looks him in the eye. “It does suit you better, I agree!”

“Thanks.” Sol laughs in turn. “You look so much happier.”

“I am!” She reaches out to squeeze Sol’s hands. “You also seem like you’re thriving!” Sol never heard her laugh so openly in the past, he’d remembered her as a quiet student, who rarely spoke to her peers. “So? What do you do now? Do you work around here, too?”

“A-Ah, that?” Sol squeezes at his own elbow. “No... not exactly.” He sighs then stares to the ground, the wooden planks that carpet this little shop of wonders. “I served the King as an apothecary for a few months, and now I’m going home.”

Esther blinks a few times. “Oh! Well the coincidences just keep on coming today, don’t they?” She laughs. “I’m actually on my way there to take someone’s measurements!”

Now, it is Sol’s turn to pause. “Measurements? You’re a seamstress now?”

“Of some sorts!” Esther nods with great enthusiasm as she rests her hands against her hips with a proud huff. “But I focus on crafting clothes, fabrics and threads that the wearer can use to shift into any shape they like! At first, I admit I was nervous moving to a big city like this—but business has been booming and it seems the royals got wind of my little endeavors!” She brings a palm to her lips and chuckles.

And Sol is in awe at how she can so casually mention that she has just invented multiple new ways of using magic, he’d heard of people using dangerous, forbidden magic to shift their own shapes in the past—but distilling *that magic* into a formula that can be *applied to clothes*? “That’s... very impressive.”

“Thanks, Sol!” Esther stares down to her skirt, she pinches its hems between her fingers. “Truth be told, it was a very selfish project”—pain weaves itself into her voice—“I couldn’t stand my *situation* and I refused to use forbidden magic, so eventually... I took matters into my own hands.” She huffs as she forces a smile

again then brings a determined fist to the front of her chest. “Anywho! I’m just glad I didn’t accept that forbidden magic was the only way! I feel like we as mages hold ourselves back sometimes from every possibility—since we’re taught in such a structured way, we lean on the familiar far too often—but those possibilities are, well, *endless* really if you stop to think about it! But I should stop talking now. I feel like I’ve said enough.”

“No,” Sol shakes his head as he grins and ponders on the thought, “No I think... I think that’s a wonderful thought, Esther.”

Sol can only hope he will accomplish as much in the next couple years. He does not want to fall behind. He decided, last month, that while Yohan will open his teahouse, Sol will compile all of his knowledge about the herbs in the area and what medicines can be made of them to pass down to the next generations of apothecaries that will succeed him—his time with Celestina taught him that even though she knew of many ways to cure the sick, she and most her workmates did not hold as much knowledge, about the lesser-known herbs growing in the mountainsides and more isolated parts of the lands.

Perhaps, his efforts will only be a drop amid water in terms of impact—but if it can save one life in the future, then, Sol feels documenting his research is worth the effort and time. *Of course, he will publish his compilations as Sol, which may complicate things at first.*

But Sol will tell his mentor once he returns—about the weight of his existence that he’d secretly carried for years.

And he hopes, Featherlaine will accept him for the simple man that he is.

“My heart?” Yohan calls out to Sol from the next aisle. “Shall I grab more mint for the journey?”

Sol nods to where Yohan is standing, beside a little garden table in the middle of the herbs that are still growing inside the shopkeeper’s indoor garden. “That sounds lovely—thank you, love!” When Sol turns back towards Esther, she eyes Yohan with a raised brow and a smirk.

“My!” Esther tells Sol. “Aren’t you leading an *interesting* life!” She fixes a stray strand of hair that she neatly tucks behind her ear with a giggle. “Invite me to the wedding, will you?”

“Oh.” Sol glimpses back, briefly, at Yohan. “I...” The knight is picking out herbs with that odd scowl again. *Is he merely lost in his concentration to his task?*

Sol can't remember seeing this expression on him before, until today. "I don't think we've decided on a date yet." *Odd*, he thinks as he blinks, "but I'll let you know."

As Yohan disappears towards a section of herbs specifically recommended for horses, Sol meets Esther's gaze again—Esther, who goes from quiet, to beet red in the face, reaches for Sol's shoulders as her eyes widen in utter shock. "*What!*" She brings a palm to her lips as her eyes widen in utter shock. "Sol? I was *kidding! Gods, really? Is it true?*" She perks up and jumps on the spot, finding herself holding Sol's hands once more and shaking them once with great enthusiasm before she swiftly lets go. "Congratulations! I'm so happy for you! You know, it is funny, yet I always thought you would be the first one to find love!"

As they continue to talk, Sol finds it funny that despite their newly adopted differences—in the end, nothing has changed, they are merely happier versions of the hollow lies they once inhabited, truer fragments of their souls finally connecting for real.

Sol tells Esther of his time as Andrcoles' protégé, about *Featherlaine* the little town that saved him yet tethered him to loneliness all the same until he left for this unforgettable journey by Yohan's side. He expresses his excitement for Yohan's future tearoom and current brews, and invites Esther to stop by if she is ever in the area, so that Sol can properly introduce them.

Esther agrees with glee.

At some point in their conversation, Sol considers asking about — but, he decides not to, in the end. Sol is proud of himself for not crying at the mere thought of — even when it might be a silly thing to take pride in, he hopes this means he is healing in some ways; it is hard to tell, sometimes, with this particular scar. Nothing can undo what has been done, but he feels something inside him unraveling. The power that man held over him is leaving, little by little.

Esther, in turn, tells Sol of all the sights she has seen throughout travels of her own overseas. Sol listens to her tales of all the nobles she has helped, who were once people like Sol and her, who believed a path to happiness could not be walked. Sol is glad his old roommate has been living such an exciting life. Though it feels bittersweet that they never got to graduate together after they'd

promised to do so all those years ago, he is grateful for the opportunity to have met her again. “Still, isn’t it funny?” Esther adds.

And Sol blinks. “What is?”

She grasps at his hands then chuckles. “To have met here again of all places—in the city where the Royal Liberator Of Mages once trained, and allowed us to serve Kings and Queens again, it almost feels like fate!”

Oh. Sol had completely forgotten, but it is true. When royal courts did not allow mages to practice amongst their ranks hundreds of years ago, there was a Prince once, who sought to change that: and it all started here.

If only Sol could remember his name...

“I suppose,” Sol scratches at his cheek as he laughs in turn, “that is quite fun.” He sighs. “Maybe I should come back here sometime, visit a monument or two in his honor.”

“Let me know if you ever do!”

Outside, the bell within a cathedral rings, signaling noon’s arrival.

“Ah, gosh,” Esther quickly reaches into her satchel and shuffles around looking for something. “*How* has it been this long already!” she grumbles, before she finally gasps once her fingers apparently brush against her findings. Out from her bag, she pulls a small card made from hardened fabric that she hands to Sol—on it, is her address in gold embroidery. “Here! If you ever want to write me.” She pats Sol on the shoulder before she pulls away again. “I don’t want to lose you again, Sol, I’d love to hear from you sometime.”

“Oh.” Sol’s grin reaches his eyes as he observes the card for an instance. A hint of warmth spreads throughout his cheeks. “Thank you I... I don’t want to lose you again either, Esther.”

The two bid each other their long overdue farewells—*though it is finally time for goodbyes, it does not feel like forever this time*, Sol thinks to himself as he waves and watches Esther leave, the small bell hung above the herbal shop’s door rings in the air with her passing through the little green entrance.

“Sol?” Yohan calls as he returns to Sol’s side with a paper bag full of herbs for their journey. He slips his fingers between Sol’s then presses a kiss to Sol’s forehead. As the two leave in turn then walk towards a fruit stand full of lovely lush colors and what are likely the juiciest apples Sol has ever laid his eyes on,

Yohan parts his lips again. “Are you all right? I didn’t want to interrupt, but I couldn’t help but notice you seemed... elsewhere, at times.”

“I...” Sol picks up an apple, mindlessly, then three. “I was reminded of the past.” Sol finds himself shrugging, sighing, as he glances up to Yohan again. “But, don’t worry about me! I think I’ll be fine.”

Yohan pulls him in for a side hug, and Sol can barely bring himself to care that people are staring, looking. With their engagement still lingering in his mind, he wants to be close to his beloved today.

“Do you need to talk about it?” Though Yohan speaks the question casually, Sol knows there is weight to it. It is true that they have never properly talked. Sol has only shown him his feelings through magic. And although they do not need to talk, things are fine as they are... Sol would like to.

Yet, the words still catch in his throat at the prospect of telling his beloved. “Later, perhaps.” Sol hugs him back, his arms wrapped around Yohan’s waist, like waves that crash across sand. “I’m tired.”

And a little fearful, Sol leaves these words quiet and unsaid. Because in truth, he does not know what words to use to tell Yohan. The truth feels like a poison sometimes, Sol knows it will hurt his beloved no matter how he says it, and he doesn’t want it to break a piece of him, like it has broken something inside Sol. *Because you are the one I love the most*, he thinks as he observes Yohan, who has gathered a few vegetables in his hands, and is laughing so lightly as he exchanges a few words with a farmer—as if he has not just escaped from decades of darkness.

You are the one I love the most, Sol thinks, *perhaps, that is why, you are the one whom it is hardest with to put the past into words.*

Perhaps, I fear you would see me differently, if you knew everything.

* * *

The long, man-made roads slowly dwindle as Sol and Yohan’s journey meets the setting sun—they’ve made quite a bit of progress so far, still, they are nowhere near seeing home on the horizon. But it was a good day, and a well needed

moment of rest they took to stock up on provisions that will last them for days now. Though Sol had insisted they split the costs, Yohan argued that he wanted *this* to be one of the first few things he bought with the lifetime's worth of gold the Crown gave him as a second parting gift. "A taste of freedom, finally!" the knight had exclaimed.

And who was Sol to deny him that?

A pleasant aftertaste of salt washes through the breeze, the sound of the waves greet them as they near the ocean, a cliffside on which stands a rather impressive, abandoned lighthouse that watches over the shoreline. Sol eyes it for an instance, there is moss growing around its rocks and ivy climbing its pale fractured walls. But a quick peek inside is all Sol needs to know it has been well preserved; it would seem they are not the only travelers who have sought to find respite within its walls in the past, firewood that must have been lit less than a dozen days ago has been left behind near a now defunct fireplace. Sol and Yohan decide to set up camp for the night, leaving Yohan's horse tied to a large boulder not too far away.

The two step forward, inside the lighthouse together with their belongings in one hand, and each other's palms in the other.

A hay bed is risen against a corner still protected by the lantern-room above. Sol and Yohan grab a thick, warm quilt together from one of their bags, then drape it over the hay—it'll likely not be as comfortable as the mattress in the cottage, yet this adventure already makes Sol nostalgic for their first days spent together, and oddly he finds himself excited at the prospect of sharing this little makeshift bed with his beloved.

As Sol continues to pat down the quilt atop the hay to drive out any excess bumps, Yohan grabs a few herbs and oats from his bag then declares with pride that he is going to feed his horse. "I'll be right back, my love! He deserves a treat after such a long day!" Sol watches him stride out of the lighthouse's entrance, a decaying wooden door that has likely survived one too many threatening waves in its lifetime, with how it is falling apart at its edges.

Sol wonders if he could patch it up a tad before they leave, for the sake of the next travelers who will stop by here. He kneels then shuffles through his belongings to find a pillow for the night, and hopefully something that could help him fix that door. The sole window above his figure allows grey light to filter in through the

vines as it is cast onto his figure, sounds of trinkets colliding with each other inside Sol's satchel echo briefly across the lighthouse's walls and their vast lengths, until Sol's ring finger chills at the touch of cool glass. He does not recall packing anything of the sort—as he wraps his hand around the culprit, Sol finds himself looking again at the small vial the elderly woman had gifted him months ago, back at the city's enchanted Marketplace Of Wonder.

Sol stares at the vial in silence. He leans away from his satchel to peer back at the outside world: Yohan is still feeding his stallion, blissfully unaware that the curiosity which finds all mages has now grabbed Sol by the collar.

Sol, who is now reaching into his sack again to grasp at a magical compass lined in gold—the only heirloom his mother left him—shaped in a star, instead of pointing to a location, it indicates the nature of a magical item, potion or herb. Sol opens the vial, sniffing it with a raised brow—it does not smell of anything putrid, nor can he detect any immediate curses attached to the scent, *meaning it is most probably safe...*

Probably.

Behind him, Yohan is still distracted, attempting to secure the lighthouse's lock that is barely holding on its door with the aid of a magical item he bought from the marketplace.

As Sol raises the vial to the compass, he does something foolish—he tips the vial around and lets one, single drop of silver fall onto gold, failing to realize in time that some of its contents have touched his finger. Sol does not even need to glimpse at the compass to immediately recognize the magic at hand, from the way that it feels, seeping deep under his skin, into his mind. *He studied this type of potion, once.*

It is not bad magic, per se, but it will make you feel.

And, Sol thinks as thick tears line his eyes and stream down his face, *now is truly not the time for this.* “Shit,” Sol finds himself cursing for lack of a better thing to do. Vivid memories flow through him—first, of Yohan making love to him on the first night they spent together at the cottage, and his mind fills with the undeniable safety he'd felt on that day. *For the first time in his life.* However time slowly flows backwards, and soon, it is as if he'd never met Yohan at all.

As if he were back to being a student of the magical arts, spending his afternoons beside — who would teach him all sorts of new spells and tricks, who

took Sol out for dinner to congratulate him on passing his exams as the first of his class.

To this day, Sol still wonders if he'd planned it from the start—if *those memories he'd cherished for so long had even meant the same to — as they had meant to Sol. Or if that man had always planned on doing those vile, vile things to him.*

Sol will never know.

And then, he thinks of his mother, whom he never really knew. *He wonders if she still thinks of him sometimes, or if she is ashamed of his existence.*

When Yohan finally finds him again, Sol is sobbing into his pillow. "Sol!" the knight calls out to him as he rushes to his side, his aid. "What's wrong? My love, what happened?"

"Nothing," Sol snuffles, miserable, a wreck against the makeshift bed. "I— I'm a curious fool, that is all." He shakes his head. "*Gods.*" After a few moments, Sol finally admits it, "Someone gave me an odd potion, and I... accidentally touched its contents."

"You *used* an unknown *potion*?" Sol can already see Yohan scrambling for their belongings amid the blur of his wet gaze, likely intending for them to leave so they can find a healer right now. Yohan sounds all the more worried than before, which really was not Sol's intention when explaining the matter, since it is nothing grave at all.

"Yohan, it's fine." He stops the knight right there as he reaches for his arm. "It was made with ingredients used in magical therapy."

"Oh." Yohan pauses, and finally settles down. As his shoulders relax, the knight sits, kneeling on the ground by Sol's side. "I see." He nods. "Well, in that case..." Yohan's palm settles on Sol's back, the warmth of his skin a gentle invitation, that Sol welcomes as he leans into his beloved's touch. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Hold me?" Sol asks, weakly, and he need only say the word before Yohan is embracing him atop the hay bed. As Sol curls into his beloved's embrace he curses under his breath. *Blasted witch*, he thinks as he recalls the elderly woman's cunning smile, *it was indeed a useful gift, but one that he would have appreciated a warning for.*

Then again, Sol is not sure he would have subjected himself to this, had he known—he never dared make such a potion for himself, after all.

Sol does not recall passing out, yet when he blinks again, he sees the stars aglimmer through broken pieces of the round rooftop. His eyes are still wet with tears, it seems, he cried all throughout the night. Sol sighs. *Sometimes, all you can do is wait out the storm.* As dreadful as that experience was, his mind is empty now. He doesn't think it was just the potion, though. Sol thinks back on his travels, on all the sights he saw, the people he met, every lasting memory... He was so afraid of this world when he departed on this strange journey. Everything seemed so vast, the Kingdom so full of potential yet evil all the same—and Sol wanted to hide away in the comfort of his little village, far from everything, *everyone.*

The mere thought of being deceived again is one he could not stand back then.

Yet, as much as there is evil in this world, Sol has learned it to be of a great kindness, too. Every face, every soul he met was a light in the darkness, who each healed him in their own special ways. Ways he's no doubt he will carry in his heart until the day he breathes his last; and, perhaps, a little after that, too.

"Sol?" Yohan asks as he rouses, his voice woven full of unease, and concern.

As Sol rests his hands against his stomach, he blinks. "Yes, beloved?"

"Do you... happen to recall your dream?"

Amid the darkness, Sol raises a brow. *What is he talking about?* "What? Why?"

"Sol. My heart." Though Yohan would have usually held him in these circumstances, he seems to be recoiling away, out of... caution? "You were gripping my tunic so tightly, and mumbling something about being afraid—afraid of me..."

As Yohan's voice trails off, Sol tenses. "T-That's—" He tries to remember his dream, yet nothing comes to mind. "I don't..." *Gods, of course, he'd have one of those nightmares after drinking that potion: it only makes sense.* "Sorry." There is a bout of silence, and the air catches in Sol's throat. "I'm sorry."

"Why?" Yohan whispers—their eyes meet again. "Why do you apologize?"

Sol's lower lip shakes. The frenzied beating of his heartbeat pulses in his neck, his eardrums. "After all you've done for me, I don't want to be afraid. I *know* you would never..." He heaves in another breath. "I know it's fine." And he notices, that Yohan is still holding back from touching him. "Yohan," Sol mumbles as he reaches for the knight's hand in a tentative motion. "Do you not

want to touch me anymore? Are you..." He lowers his gaze. "Was it too off-putting to hear that I was afraid?"

"No," Yohan shakes his head. "That isn't why, Sol, I..." He sighs. "I was worried that you would not want to be touched anymore. Or that you were... merely tolerating my touch."

"You're the only person who makes me feel truly safe." Sol locks their fingers together—and relief floods his mind when his beloved finally reciprocates. Their gazes meet. "I know... it doesn't make much sense, right?" A forced laugh escapes him. "However, I swear, I love it when you touch me. It isn't something I am merely tolerating. In fact, it feels strange when we don't embrace in the mornings. I thought... that something was wrong."

"So did I..." Yohan whispers as he finally pulls Sol in, close to his chest. "Are you sure," he tucks a stray strand of hair behind Sol's ear, "that this is okay right now?"

Sol nods. "Though," He buries his face into the knight's chest and holds him tightly. "I'm sorry for not saying anything, and that this is how you had to find out, I...didn't want you to think I didn't trust you. Because I do. I do, and I would not have done all that we have, if I didn't. But..." Sol sighs. "Sometimes, fear defies logic." *And even love*, he thinks. "It may take me a while before my heart remembers, that trust is a gift that can be given without worry."

Now that these feelings he'd been trying to deny are out there, laid bare before Yohan, Sol isn't sure how to feel. He knew he would tell Yohan one day, but he didn't think it would be like this. *Still... as conflicted as he may be, part of him is relieved. The longer he waited, the heavier the weight of his fears would grow, and he could not bear another month of this.*

Abovehead, rain covers the land in a small drizzle that *plickplocks* against the lighthouse's wood, and ceramic tile. Yohan kisses the crown of his head again. "I would much rather die before harming you, Sol." He brings an open palm to the curve of Sol's spine. "If it meant you would live a long and happy life, unharmed from the dangers of the world, I would gladly leap into Danger's fray, even now without the protection of the Old King's curse." Sol's breaths grow heavier as Yohan softly plays with his hair, leaving a peppered trail of kisses into his dark strands. "When you proposed to me in the gardener's cottage, and I told you that I loved you, I meant every single one of those words. *My heart*," Yohan's hot

breaths fall against Sol's lips, "I am privileged to spend every day beside you, no matter what those days may look like—if you would have me, then I will love you in the ways you deserve, I promise, you have nothing to fear. But, of course"—Yohan huffs as he brings Sol's knuckles to his lips then glances at him again, a cheeky grin etches itself into his lips—"I will have a lifetime to show you that perhaps, if not in words, then in actions." He kisses Sol's hand. "I do not care how long it takes, Sol, as long as you are happy."

"Yohan..." Sol reaches for Yohan's palms beneath the covers, he squeezes at the knight's fingers, the moon illuminates the knight's features in soft, gentle light. "I..." Though Sol already knew it merely from the way Yohan had acted until now, treating him with nothing but patience, care and kindness—hearing the knight's confession aloud serves as a strange reassurance Sol didn't realize he needed.

He wants to believe it.

He really does.

He presses his lips to Yohan's collarbones.

And as Sol comes to lay on top of his chest, Yohan wraps his arms around his back and pulls him closer. The knight whispers beside his ear, "And Sol?"

"Yes, Yohan?"

"I'll think nothing less of you—for whatever feelings you may have, whatever you may have been through, you are still the same Sol you have always been in my heart."

Sol traps his lower lip between his teeth. His fingers briefly furl into fists atop Yohan's chest. "Ah..." *Perhaps, he does not need to be in such a rush to tell him, after all.* Sol stares down to his lover's face, an unwavering grin takes his lips and Yohan leaves him to the silence, until Sol speaks anew. "I think... I needed to hear you say that."

Yohan leaves him to the silence, until Sol sighs into his chest. "Yohan, I— I don't think I could love anyone else even if I tried," he mumbles, "thank you, my gentle sun." And as Yohan runs his fingers through his hair, he caresses Sol's head in slow, gentle motions. Sol feels himself slip away again into a pleasant dream, one where he walks in the direction he loves, the path leading him to Yohan.

In the remaining hours of his slumber, Sol sees a future in which he and Yohan live happily together without a worry in the world—he does not think

this is a vision, for he is certain they will always have their own worries and struggles to carry together when those times will come, but he wants to believe that the future can be good again. To him. And to his lover.

* * *

Sol has rarely slept this heavily. Last night feels like a dream, and it does not bleed into this day despite the words they shared, their confessions are left to yesterday's midnight hours.

Sol finds, he is lighter now. More awake. As he rouses, Yohan is beside him, watching him through a smitten gaze. He rests a palm against Sol's jaw. "Good morning, sweetheart." He kisses Sol's forehead and chuckles. "You've had a talkative night."

"W-What?" Sol blurts as he pauses. "*Again?* What did I—"

But Yohan merely strokes Sol's hair. "Nothing too notable." Sol notices his beloved is being a tad more gentle in his movements, somehow, if that is even possible. "You were merely hugging me tight, and whispering *I love you, Yohan, I love you, please marry me again!*" Before Sol can reply, Yohan presses their lips together, a low growl rises up his throat. "I could certainly get used to being proposed to every day."

"Oh my *Gods*." Sol buries his face into his palms with a flustered whine. But if it pleases you that much..." He groans as he peeks at his knight again past his now-spread fingers. "I suppose, I could do it again." Yohan is beaming; it is difficult to resist his warmth. *He truly is a gentle sun*, Sol thinks as he slips his arms around the knight's shoulders then nuzzles their noses together. "Also," he pouts, "good morning to you, too."

Yohan chuckles. "*Ah*, so sweet of you to say it back, my heart." Something about the way that Yohan's deep voice reverberates against his ribcage finds heat pooling in Sol's loins. As Yohan laughs again then presses his lips to Sol's neck, Sol kisses the knight's temple. *He yearns to be close to him today, nothing else, nothing more*. He holds his beloved in silence, listening as their breaths intermingle for what feels like forever. There is birdsong outside. The taste of

salt is strong in the air, as is the sound of waves crashing against the shore's rocks, Yohan's stallion huffs with newfound energy behind the old wooden door. Sol knows it will be time to go soon—*they cannot possibly stay here forever, if they ever hope to make it home, before the summer ends.*

"It isn't far from here," Yohan suddenly says, and his words pull Sol from his own reflections. "The flowers I wanted to show you." Yohan brushes the hair out of Sol's face. "Do you still want to go?" he asks. "It will only be a short detour."

Sol squeezes at Yohan's shoulders. "Of course, I do," he says, before he pulls away smiling. "I've been looking forward to it all month."

They have breakfast over a wooden crate and their picnic blanket—it is a short meal that consists of porridge and freshly cut fruit, Yohan bought two bowls of it from the marketplace yesterday, while Sol had the same bowls conserved with the aid of magic. As Sol brings a spoonful to his lips, the fruit is indeed, perfectly preserved; the apples taste as though they were plucked minutes ago from a nearby tree. He almost wishes he'd gotten another serving to last them for tomorrow's morning, however, Sol doesn't have too much time to ponder on his losses.

It isn't long before he and Yohan are off, out the lighthouse's exit and traveling across a trail that seems to grow longer by the minute. Yohan briefly stops when they reach the oceanside, he discards his armor then pulls his trousers to his ankles in hopes of nabbing a few small fish from the water. Sol watches him from afar with mild entertainment growing in his gaze, there are a few times where he gasps, whenever it seems Yohan may actually succeed. But in the end, the tide is too high today for fishing to be an easy task. And at the worry of wasting more time on this fruitless endeavor, Yohan gives up then rejoins Sol on his mount. "I guess I got ahead of myself..." he grumbles under his breath before they take off again and Sol pats his back in reassurance with a laugh.

"It's still nice that you tried."

They rise up the mountainside, wading through paths each all the more rocky than their predecessors, their backs engulfed by the greenery. The deep forest beckons to swallow them whole as they leave the lighthouse behind; Sol appreciates the difference traveling by horse makes, now that they are entering more difficult terrain that would have usually given him great struggle on foot,

the strength of Yohan's stallion carrying them across the land has him feeling as though they could be home any minute now.

Sol rests his head against Yohan's back as he holds onto his midriff. He yawns. "This is so much easier than when we were trying to get to the palace by foot..."

"Ah? Is it?" The knight lets out a strong, burly laugh. "I didn't even notice," he says, his voice soft now, as if he is recalling a fond memory; and Sol has to wonder how much stamina the man has, until his beloved clears his throat then adds, "I was having so much fun traveling in your company, the journey flew by."

Sol's mouth forms around the shape of an *oh* that does not quite leave him in sound. *What a sweet thing to say.* He deepens his hold around Yohan's waist and embraces him with a smile. "Maybe...we could do this again sometime, when things are quieter and we've settled in? I agree that, despite how tiring it was at times, it was fun. It's a shame to think... it could possibly be our last adventure together."

"I couldn't agree more!" Yohan's voice sifts through the air again, clear as the daylight that shines through the leaves above. "Not to mention!" he steers his horse leftward, and Sol can hear the smile in his voice. "Now that I am free, traveling for my own sake instead of on the King's behalf seems like it would be a welcome change of pace, I am sure we can find plenty to task ourselves with once we are ready—can you imagine all the herbs and fruit that are simply waiting to be discovered in the region? Oh, Sol! Just thinking about it makes me want to leave today!"

Sol hums as he laughs in turn. "Let's not get ahead of ourselves now. Still..." He sighs. "If I am to properly document every single plant in the area, that would indeed be a useful trip..."

"Wouldn't it?"

A grin takes Sol's lips as he leans into the knight. "I can't wait."

They ride for a little more in silence, leaves and little twigs crunch beneath the horse's hooves, they bask in the hospitable sounds and warmth of nature's gentle sunlight until Yohan's steed comes to a halt.

"We're here," Yohan tells him, before the two dismount. Sol catches that expression on his beloved again, a twitch of his brow, the corner of his lip being tugged downward.

“Yohan? Are you—”

“*Well!*” Yohan clears his throat, and the expression disappears from his face anew. “I’ll be back!” he calls out before Sol can question him. Yohan walks away, to let his horse drink some water from an extra pouch he got just for this sole purpose; Sol remembers him filling it earlier this morning, how Yohan had said he wanted to be sure he’d have enough water for the day. He watches as Yohan ties the stallion to a tree beneath the shade, as if he hasn’t a care in the world now.

Sol raises a brow at him whilst he watches Yohan in mild confusion. *It doesn’t seem like Yohan is in the right mood to have this discussion, but, they should... definitely talk about this later.* Sol grabs hold of the satchel with their food for the day, and Yohan takes his free hand then leads him away.

They walk until they reach a clearing; amid the forest’s core, is a field filled with little golden bobbing petals who sway in the winds of summer. The circlet of trees gives way to a full view of the sky, where clouds spill cream shades into the heavy cerulean ceiling. “Beautiful...” the word leaves Sol’s lips before he can even think it as he stares at their surroundings in pure wonder and delight. In all his short-lived life, he has never seen a sight like this before, it is something out of a dream. Or rather, a *painting*, might be more exact.

He turns back to glance at Yohan, with glee smeared across his lips. “How did you even find this place?” It seems as though it would be incredibly easy to miss and difficult to remember all the same, considering its location.

Yohan’s palm finds Sol’s shoulder as he looks to the sky in turn. “When I first became one of the Old King’s Cursed Riders, there was a day where I did not think I could take any more: the pressure, *every duty*, even having the knowledge that I might die before being able to live a life of my own was enough to make me wonder if serving the King was worth it anymore. *Who cares if he frees me from the curse in twenty years? Who cares if Celestina protects me from being consumed by its darkness? Wouldn’t it be better if I lived at least a few months of freedom instead of risking my life day in day out?* I kept thinking to myself. So... I ran away.

“You—” Sol’s eyes widen. “I didn’t even know you could do that...”

“Well,” Yohan laughs with a shrug. “I was certainly one of the first and the last, they had their hands full with me, that was for certain.”

Sol's fingers find Yohan's, his brows arch in solemn sorrow. "I'm sorry, Yohan." He wishes he could take the knight's pain away.

Yohan threads his fingers through Sol's hair then kisses his cheek. "When I decided I wouldn't come back," he motions to the field of sunflowers, who seem to rise higher with every step he and Sol take, surrounding them in gold, in life, "that's when I found this place—and at that moment, in my heart I knew, after seeing this sight, that living was not some sort of optional, trivial thing." Yohan's gaze falls upon the flowers as a gentle smile takes his lips, the wind brushes his hair back. "I just knew I had to live, to survive—I didn't want it to end then. I vowed to never let the curse take me. And, now that it is over," he squeezes Sol's hand then peers down at Sol, "you've no idea how glad I am to have made it this far. And with you by my side, too, now. My love." Yohan leans down to kiss Sol, when he pulls away, their gazes meet. "I am so glad *we* have made it this far."

To these words, Sol can find nothing to do but embrace his lover in triumph. As he holds his beloved closer to his chest, he whispers to the wind, "Me too..." And the sun bathes them both in the warmth of its brightest light.

Amid the ring of sunflowers, across the lands afternoon settles, and Yohan motions to the bag holding their midday provisions with a tilt of his head. "Shall we, then?"

He needn't ask twice, Sol's appetite craves a good meal after their journey. However, when Yohan lays out another, different picnic blanket where two hearts containing the letters 'S' and 'Y' have been embroidered into its fabric, the sight takes Sol by surprise.

"Yohan..." Sol leans down to where Yohan is kneeling, rearranging the blanket across the grass, to kiss the crown of his beloved's head. "Did you sew it yourself?"

Sol swears that he sees Yohan's face blush a shade darker as the words leave his lips. "I-Is it not to your liking?"

"It is," Sol whispers, running his fingers down Yohan's neck. "You're sweet." He can feel Yohan relax under his touch, and takes this opportunity to brush a hand through Yohan's hair, softly, as he whispers, "My good boy."

Yohan looks to him, his eyes full of longing. He rises to his feet, lets Sol feel the difference in their heights, before he cups Sol's jaw. He pulls Sol into a kiss. And Sol's teeth scrape his lower lip. And the knight's tongue pushes Sol's lips

apart. And they pant, hungry and aching for more into each other's mouths. Yohan moans when Sol's hands trace an invisible path of his touch down his chest. "I'm starving, beloved," Sol whispers through lidded eyes as he stares at his knight—Yohan, who seemingly pretends not to notice that Sol was not speaking about the food.

"Then," Yohan chuckles whilst he pulls away with a playful smirk, "I shall lay out our meal." There is fire burning the edges of their fingertips when they let go.

Sol licks his lips, wondering if they will revisit this later, before his eyes fall atop their meal. Across the picnic blanket, there are sandwiches filled with salad and fish, grapes and little strawberry jam biscuits. Tea, *of course*, is also on the menu—its contents still warm thanks to Yohan's Gift. Sol finds it slightly fascinating that this particular magic only seems to work on beverages, not food. He wonders why that is.

As Sol finds himself seated between Yohan's legs, and Yohan leans forward, into him—as much as they cannot keep their hands off the food, they also cannot keep their hands off each other.

Sol didn't think he'd consider returning to the lighthouse simply for the sole purpose of begging Yohan to take him there, quickly, however with the way this afternoon is going he admits the thought crosses his mind more than once—still, as two men with patience who dislike the idea of wasting of precious food, the two take the utmost care with finishing their meals. But when they get to dessert, the brush of their fingers against each other's wrists whenever they reach out to serve themselves with more fruit, how Yohan's lips are devilishly close to Sol's ears when he asks him if he is still hungry, *if he would like more*, is enough to send them tipping over the edge of desire.

Yohan feeds the last piece of grape to Sol who bites into it with a grand appetite; he swallows it, then licks the remaining juices off Yohan's fingers.

"Sol..." Yohan warns, his voice low, enveloped by a taunting grunt.

Sol has rarely heard his beloved this worked up before. *It is nice to know they share the same hunger.* He tugs on Yohan's arm lightly, grasps at his hands before guiding them to his shoulders, in hopes that his beloved will pin him into the ground. The amount of lust he feels today is almost shameful—but he finds, that he wants to give Yohan everything. *To let his big, strong knight control his pleasure.*

Sol lets a vulnerable, almost pitiful look cross his gaze as he meets Yohans. Softly, he tells his beloved, "I'd like you to take control, my love—full control."

Yohan's eyes widen, before he has Sol on his back in no time.

As his big, warm hand comes to rest on Sol's stomach and holds him down, Sol arches into his touch. Yohan breathes, hot and heavy against his ear. "My love, may I?"

The question pulls a giggle out of Sol, who reaches up to run his fingers down the side of Yohan's face, before he kisses his knight. "You may," he tells Yohan, a smile on his lips as he does so.

"Sol." Yohan kisses back, and his fingers twine with Sol's now. "Show me." Another, low grunt. "Show me how to touch you, my heart."

Sol swallows his pulse that beats in his throat, as he grasps Yohan's wrists between his, he guides Yohan's hands across his body, atop his chest. "Here," Sol whispers. "And..." He moves again, does his best to avoid his thighs, until Yohan's hand is between his legs. "Here, too—"

"I see." Yohan says, his voice unperturbed as if they were talking about mere weather; he sighs against Sol's neck and pushes into the fabric of Sol's trousers.

The pressure of Yohan's fingers on his cock has Sol writhing beneath his beloved. "P-Please—" Sol whines, *he is so gods damned aroused, he does not know what to do with himself anymore.*

Sol lays with his legs spread half-across the picnic blanket and the grass.

He takes a breath then stares at the beauty of the sky. As Yohan pinches the hems of his robe and raises his eyebrows at Sol, Sol gives him a knowing look, a nod with a playful grin as he bites into his lower lip. The knight soon disrobes him and brings his lips to Sol's chest, where he leans in to suckle on Sol's nipple as he glances upward to look Sol in the eye—for once, Sol does not look away.

As he meets the knight's gaze with trembling lips and his chest heaving up with the sharp inhale he takes, Sol lets the knight do as he pleases *because it is also what pleases him.* "Oh, that's so good," Sol hisses, when he feels Yohan's teeth rubbing up against his perked skin.

Though it should not, something about this feels forbidden, like fruit made only to be tasted by their lips. Yohan is loving every part of him—even *the pieces Sol longed to wish away, it is so strange yet wondrous, that they are now a door to his pleasure*—and when the knight reaches down with his free hand to rub rose pink

flesh around Sol's cock without ever directly touching him, Sol finds himself grinding down against his beloved's hand.

His eyes roll to the back of his head, his eyes flutter shut with a shiver. "You're—*a-ah*—taking your time today."

Yohan chuckles against his skin. "Of course. I want to love you well, my heart."

A moan rises from Sol's throat. "*F-Fuck—*" The sounds that pour out of his lips finds him flustered, Yohan is playing his body like a harp he has mastered, and Sol is so terribly keen to receive every gentle stroke of his fingers. "*Yohan.*"

Sol relishes in the way his beloved moves against him, as he hiccups another moan, Yohan leans in to kiss the skin over Sol's heart. And Sol gulps, he is certain the knight can hear his heart pounding, he *wants* him to hear. *Wants him to know how much this means to him. How Yohan truly is everything to him: the dawn Sol wants to rise to, and the darkness he wants to lose himself in.* "You always love me well." *Oh, how Sol pines for his irresistibly handsome lover,* he reaches for Yohan again, his fingers trembling against the knight's shoulder. "Y-Yohan— *Gods*—it's *so good...*"

Yohan hushes him. "It is all right, Sol. You needn't worry yourself with anything right now." Sol's beloved kisses the underside of his jaw, grinning, as he continues to rub circles across Sol's warmth, his fingers slowly inching closer to Sol's cock. "Close your eyes for a moment," he whispers with a press of his lips to Sol's eyelashes now as he touches their foreheads together. "Relax for me, my love."

As Sol stops fighting the urge to keep his eyes on Yohan, his gaze flutters shut. The pleasure indeed, does intensify, for is it the only sensation he can focus on now. The sky is gone. So are the sunflowers. It is only Yohan's fingers touching him, circling his cock in soft, gentle ways. "*O-Oh—*" Sol doesn't mean for the sound to leave him, but it does when Yohan's fingertips rub against his warmth again—he is so sensitive now, after being teased for so long, that his release comes quicker than he expects and catches him off guard.

He clings to Yohan, the knight's name spilling out of his lips, as Yohan continues to stroke him in a gentle rhythm, Sol grinds his hips down against his beloved's hand. "*Gods, I—*" The end of his phrase is followed by another, shaken moan.

Sol's climax only grows as he trembles, feeling *hot* golden warmth rushing through his veins—Yohan holds him through it all, kissing down the side of his face as he whispers sweet words and *I love yous* to Sol, until Sol is breathing heavily, his eyes wide as he stares at the beauty of the sky, the clouds passing him by. It is odd, perhaps, to feel as though he is completely connected to the world in this moment, but he does. *He is*. Sweat soaked skin dampens the hair against his forehead. A fire inside him is burning. *Never in his life has he felt more alive*. “Yohan,” Sol finally exhales, “that was so...”

Sol blinks, he is still a tad shaken but in the best of ways, *no one—not even himself—has ever touched him like that before*. “Gods.” he stares at Yohan in awe. “I like it, when you take your time like that, actually...” Sol smiles. “I didn’t know that until now.” He doesn’t know why but he is laughing now—everything was all so naturally pleasurable, without any need to think twice, it felt as natural as breathing. *He didn’t think it could be this way*. Sol realizes, he is enjoying coming into himself like this—learning to enjoy what this body can do for him, *dare he say, even reclaiming it as his own after feeling like a stranger in his own skin for so long*.

It is so freeing.

So, so freeing.

He and Yohan lay beside each other, their heads turned towards one another, as they laugh together without a care in the world. Sol pushes up against his elbows to straddle Yohan’s waist: though he is still naked from the waist down, his robe falls across his waist, again until it covers his thighs.

Sol stares down to his knight, licking his lips, his heart aflame with lust. “So, beloved?” he asks with an innocent, tilt of his head, before his lips that he presses to Yohan’s curve into an amorous grin. “What now?” Sol whispers as his index finger comes to rest beneath Yohan’s chin. “What could my *good boy* possibly want?”

“Sol, *you*—” Yohan looks away with mild embarrassment as his face flushes a deep shade of vermillion, he covers his eyes with his free hand and Sol thinks he is truly, never getting over this man—every day he falls deeper. “I did not expect you to actually say it so often...”

“Ah?” Sol coos as if he truly doesn’t know what Yohan is referring to. *Yohan has made him feel the divine today, and Sol wants to return the favor to him, tenfold*.

“Should I say it less often, then?”

Yohan sighs, long and slow; Sol watches the rising, falling of his chest with fascination. Until Yohan shakes his head. “Please, my heart...” He is still covering his eyes with his palms. “Say it as many times as you wish.”

Sol snickers as he leans in closer to his ear. “I see.” He nibbles on Yohan’s earlobe. “That definitely sounds like something a good boy would say.”

Yohan heaves in another breath, and Sol can feel him harden beneath his ass. Yohan’s hips are trembling, it is obvious he is holding himself back from thrusting. His face flushed, redder than the strawberry jam they consumed just a minute ago, as he wears the smile of a man who feels *deliciously* out of his element. “Are you really going to make me beg, my love?” Yohan whispers, his voice quiet as he glances upward to Sol, with utter subservience in his gaze.

Soon, Sol’s face is flushed hot, too. *All that Yohan encompasses excites him to no end.*

Sol gently urges Yohan’s hand away from his face, then rests a palm against his lover’s jaw. He stares down to his beloved with a tender gaze. He coos, “You know I wouldn’t do that to you, beloved.”

And Yohan reaches for him in turn, he thumbs at Sol’s cheek, his voice shakes in a vulnerable show. “I need you, Sol.”

“I need you, too,” Sol whispers before he is leaning down and kissing him, palming at Yohan’s erection through the fabric of the knight’s trousers.

Yohan thrusts into his hand. “*Fuck.*” Yohan grunts as he pulls him close, until their breaths ghost against one another’s lips again. “Come here, sweet love,” Sol whispers until they are kissing, their tongues pressed to each other’s, Yohan has rarely kissed him like this—it has Sol’s knees trembling, weak. “Want me to take you inside, beloved?” Sol pants.

And Yohan chuckles into his mouth. “Please do.”

Sol swallows with anticipation as he undoes the front of Yohan’s pants, he bites into his lower lip then palms at Yohan’s cock. He hisses the words, “*So big...*” into Yohan’s mouth as he impales himself on the width of the knight’s erection, eliciting a moan from his beloved, whose palms come to steady his hips with a firm grip.

The heat of Yohan’s fingers seeps in through the fabric of Sol’s robe. Desire courses and burns through Sol’s skin, he places his palms over Yohan’s chest,

then starts to move. The control their position grants him is delicious—Sol cannot get enough. Every time he grinds down against the knight, he feels Yohan twitch and grow inside his pussy. “Sol—” Yohan pants as he meets Sol’s gaze through lidded eyes. “How good you feel, my love,” the words have Sol immediately tensing around him—at the same time, Yohan decides to roll his hips into Sol’s heat.

Sol cries out, whimpering, he is dizzy and *hot* from the feel of Yohan’s thick, warm cock spreading him open. He leans down to embrace the knight. Then, in a small soft voice, mumbles a hungry request beside his ear, “Fuck me harder?”

And Yohan immediately flips him over, onto his back—Sol forgets how strong he is sometimes, but the reminder merely serves as more fuel for his arousal. Yohan fucks into him with a hand slipped around Sol’s waist, and the other pinning either of his wrists to the ground. The way his beloved is grinding against him with such fervor has Sol’s legs trembling. His mind is empty. He can’t remember the last time he and Yohan let go like this—*perhaps, it is even the first*. They are kissing again, playing with each other’s tongues, and Sol can do nothing but yield as he succumbs to the hot, overwhelming pleasure. Yohan’s breaths warm his lips as he presses his hips to Sol’s cunt *and grinds* into him until no distance is left between them.

Sol’s eyes roll to the back of his head, he hiccups a moan then giggles as he wraps his arms around the knight’s shoulders and buries his face into his chest. “Yohan,” he mutters, when he holds on to the knight with all his remaining strength, “don’t hold back.”

And Yohan slams into him again, *again* until he has found a steady rhythm whose predictability sends Sol into a blissful reverie, entranced by *knowing* when Yohan will thrust next; Sol feels the certain sense of control he loves return to him, even when Yohan has freed him from the burden of any complexity in the act. It is only when Yohan stops, snug deep in his pussy—until he has spilled all of his seed inside Sol—that Sol is coming around him for the second time today. “Oh, *Gods*, Yohan— Oh, *Gods*, Gods, *Gods*—” He cannot stop all the sounds that leave his mouth, hiccups and moans broken in the best of ways, small giggles of delight and ecstasy as the knight fills him with so much of himself that Sol feels a heated pearl warmth slip down his thighs when Yohan finally slips out of him.

They are worn from the lovemaking, and though it is tempting to lay there and look at the sky again—to *rest*—there is a need in Sol’s body to be close to him again; and it seems, Yohan feels the same. Because they kiss for what could possibly be hours afterward. They explore each other with much less urgency than before. Sol loses himself to the slow loving attentions of his beloved as he sinks into the essence of his lover and sucks on his tongue.

Yohan has a way of moving his jaw when he kisses that always eases Sol. *He feels so terribly relaxed now.* Sol thinks he could lose himself forever to this feeling. *To Yohan.*

And he does.

He does.

By the time the two of them have finished indulging in themselves, Sol is quite certain he’s burned the shape of Yohan’s lips into his mind. They linger in the silence for a moment, their soft breaths carried by the winds. When Sol opens his eyes again, it is later than he anticipates, judging merely from the darkness in the colors of the sky.

Though Sol didn’t think much of the thought of returning to the lighthouse when it briefly passed through his mind, in the end, the two find themselves circling back to it, in order to find shelter from the evergrowing night.

They may be a day later than expected, but that is okay, for they have all the time in the world now; *and Sol has a feeling he and his lover will look back on this memory fondly, once they will have grown old together.*

* * *

Outside the lighthouse amid the late morning, the two ready themselves to walk wayward roads anew. Sol is brushing their stallion’s mane, when he catches a glimpse of Yohan overlooking the cliffside in the corner of his eye. “Yohan?” Sol calls out as he squints. He observes his beloved, who watches the waves—the *castle’s silhouette*—from afar, a solemn look sprawled all across his features. He’s wearing that expression again, *except... Sol has no doubt about it now, there is definitely something more to this than he had thought.*

“O-Oh—” Yohan takes a hesitant step away from the cliffside, then rests a hand against the back of his neck. “Sol, you...” He stares at Sol and a rather forced laughter escapes him. “You startled me.”

As Sol walks toward him with a gentle stride, he rests his palm atop Yohan’s shoulder. “Is something wrong?”

Waves crash into the rocks below, the sun’s warmth pierces the clouds above and creates an oceanshine sheen that ripples across deep blue. “I...” Yohan takes a deep breath. “I don’t know.” As his chest heaves upward, he blinks a few, rapid times as he continues to stare into the ocean. Sol has rarely heard him sound so uncertain. “It is so strange,” Yohan motions to the world around them, “to be *here*.” He points toward the castle. “And not *there*. And, I—” His shoulders tense, as he shakes his head. “Around this time, I would have usually started making plans for the journey back to the castle...” There is a smile that briefly appears across his lips, yet, the corners of his mouth tug downward all the same and his face trembles, grows red. “But not this time.”

Tears line Yohan’s eyes. “I can scarcely believe it,” he whispers; his arms fall down to his sides; he is still staring at the castle’s tall, imposing silhouette. “I am free. Truly, I...”

Sol reaches for his hand and squeezes. “Yohan...” he says as his eyebrows arch, tight with tender concern for his beloved.

“Sol, I—” Yohan’s breaths quicken, a gasp escapes him as his eyes widen. He turns to Sol, the pain of a century flashes through his gaze at last. “I won’t need to kill another man if I can help it, nor will I wake for the sole purpose of answering anyone’s orders again, I...” Yohan’s lips remain parted as they shake, “I can finally cry.” The knight’s eyes gloss upward to the parting clouds, his cheeks damp with his relief. *With his hope*. “I am free, I—” As he squeezes Sol’s hand in turn, Yohan says it again, “I’m free.”

He drops to his knees, still holding onto Sol’s fingers, Yohan’s shoulders shake with the sob that escapes him—a sound that he had been holding in for far too long. “You couldn’t take me...” the knight cries, as his entire body trembles, his voice is hoarse, when he shouts words to the past. “You could not break me—I was stronger than you all! Stronger than the destiny you had *cursed* me to live!” He snuffles, his tears staining the wet rock below. Yohan’s voice breaks. “I will

never let you take me *again*. *Never*,” he whispers with a whimper, one final cry against a night that has finally come to its end.

When Sol rests a palm against the crown of Yohan’s head, the knight breaks down and clings to Sol’s robe. He wraps his arms around Sol’s waist, and buries his head into the soft fabric.

Sol runs his fingers through Yohan’s hair, and hushes him gently beneath the sound of the waves. “I’m here, Yohan,” his voice is soft, as he brushes the knight’s hair, he tells him, “You’re right. It’s over.” Sol presses a kiss to Yohan’s temple and slips his arms around Yohan’s shoulders, embracing all that he is, his pain and his dreams. “You won’t ever have to go back again.”

They linger by the lighthouse for another moment, where Sol lets Yohan cry for as long as he needs, holding his beloved through each and every feeling he’d kept locked away for so long.

“Thank you, *Sol*.”

III: Autumn

Weeks elapse, and autumn settles beige then pumpkin shades of orange in the trees, until Sol is finally met with familiar sights of roads he has traveled before—once alone six years ago, now, with Yohan today. He can hardly believe it, when the small town he'd left behind comes into view on the horizon—it looks so much more whimsical than he'd remembered.

Still, Sol's heart grows heavy with the anticipation of a confession; of having to explain why he has returned changed with a fiancé by his side, and brand new mage robes, destined to only be donned by men—a *detail that will be lost on the average villager, but definitely not to Androcles.*

Yohan squeezes Sol's hand. "Ready?" he asks.

They've forsaken traveling by horse now, having decided to walk the rest of the way for the sake of nostalgia, and to give Yohan's stallion a well-deserved rest.

Sol stares at the little houses lining Featherlaine's circular edges. He takes a deep breath. *He isn't ready.* Not when he could lose everything. *Not when he could lose Androcles, his mentor, his only connection to what he loved about the past—his only remaining family, even if not by blood, who took him in all those years ago when no one else would.*

But... "There won't ever be a right time," Sol mutters before he strides forth then leads Yohan onward, into the town he hopes they will still be able to call home by sundown. "So, I may as well get this over with now."

As they arrive before the gates, Sol stops in his tracks for a brief moment. He tugs at Yohan's cape, urging the knight towards him.

And Yohan leans down to kiss him. "For good luck," he tells Sol in a whisper, and then, "I'll be here."

Sol is thankful for the reminder; he is certain Yohan can feel his hand trembling against his armor. *He knows* he is doing nothing wrong, but he also knows, not everyone may understand. *And that is the part that scares him—being ostracized for being happy.*

Sol leaves footsteps behind in the damp, dirt path. He holds his head high. As he nears, he hears the sounds of the townsfolk growing louder.

He enters Featherlaine.

Yohan is by his side, drawing the attention of everyone as always, with his attire and stature; the stallion isn't helping their case either.

And yet, *for once*, their gazes also linger on Sol. There is surprise, mixed with uncertainty in the ways they look at him. The idea of having possibly already been recognized, and rejected, makes Sol's gut drop. His chest tightens with anxious nerves. But Yohan rubs at Sol's arm from where he'd been holding him. "Be at ease, my love," the knight whispers, "I am here with you."

They turn around another corner, when suddenly, Sol is greeted by familiar sights: there is the bakery Sol would so often visit every other morning with Androcles, and the library he spent many a too late night exploring on the weekends, when it stayed open 'til midnight. And, of course—*eventually*—they reach his mentor's little *Great Tomes & Potions* shop, still standing tall, hugged tight by all the other buildings in view.

Sol's heart fills with hope and glee and all things bright, he finds himself picking up his pace on instinct, now that he is here—*now that Androcles and his village, everything, all of this, are not just distant concepts to be turned around and observed then nitpicked in his mind*—Sol has a feeling it will be all right.

This is home, after all, isn't it?

Sol strides into his mentor's shop, where he sees Androcles standing hunched over behind the counter, leaning against his wooden cane. His mentor's eyes widen with surprise, until the tension in his features dissipate, only to be replaced by relief. "Ah!" The elderly man strokes at his beard as he chuckles, then greets Sol with his usual jolly warm smile. "It seems we have much to tell each other, don't we?" he says.

As Androcles leaves his place behind the counter for the day, he pinches the little shop's sign at the door between two fingers, that he turns from *OPEN* to *CLOSED*. Then, he motions for Sol and Yohan to walk deeper into the store,

ushers them into the kitchen, before he asks them, “Why don’t we all sit down and have dinner together?”

And Sol and Yohan accept the offer readily.

Androcles cooks a meal that warms Sol’s heart.

Over the dinner table, Sol tells his mentor of his journey, his travels and all that he has seen and wants to see; his newest plans to compile an encyclopedia; his engagement to Yohan; and finally—about *himself*. “And that’s...” Sol huffs, as he presses his palms together atop the table Androcles’ kind grin only grows wider. “That’s all of it, I suppose.”

“Sol.” Androcles rises from his seat then walks up to Sol, as he sheds a single tear, Androcles hugs Sol from the side with trembling yet nimble arms, then tells him, “How proud of you I am.”

Sol finds himself crying, too—tears of relief and of joy.

“And how glad I am,” Androcles adds, “to call you my protégé.” He sighs, and all the fears Sol once held dissipate into the air, as quickly as the steam that rises from the mugs which hold their hot chocolates across the table. “Welcome home—welcome back, Sol.”

Yohan joins them and places a reassuring hand against Sol’s back. And as a gratitude-filled grin tugs at Sol’s lips, so much that his cheeks hurt, he wonders if life could ever get better than this.

The journey—long and fruitful as it was—has ended.

Sol is finally home, as himself. And he wouldn’t wish it any other way.

That Night

That night, Androcles invites Yohan to stay, since it is already getting quite late. As Sol's mentor takes his own lantern then carries it to his bedroom, he bids them good night and leaves Sol with a little light of his own, warm and orange as it glows—the only form of magic illuminating the old potion shop amid the overgrown darkness.

It is a tad surreal to be back here with Yohan. *And to think Yohan will be sleeping in his bed tonight...* Sol has to pinch himself to make sure he is not stuck in one, long dream again.

"Sweetheart?" Yohan's voice pulls him from his thoughts. "Shall we, then?" his beloved asks, whilst he motions to the staircase leading to Sol's bedroom.

But Sol stops to think for a moment. "Would you like to bathe first? I..." He pauses then scratches at the back of his head—perhaps, it is a tad silly to feel shame on what he can and can't offer the knight, but Sol still finds his face warming at the notion. "It won't be as fancy as the showers back at the palace, h-however—"

"My love." Yohan reaches out to stroke his hair. "I chose to settle down here long before you and I first kissed." Yohan steps forward, then slips his arms around Sol's shoulders. "Do not worry yourself." He kisses Sol's forehead and smiles. "I would be grateful for a bath. Thank you."

Sol stutters a barely audible response as he stares down to the floorboards, he grasps Yohan by the hand, then leads the knight towards the back of the shop. The two pass through an inconspicuous wooden door leading to the garden, until they reach a circular wooden basin, in which Sol has taken more baths than he can remember. It is as he left it, posed right beneath a protruding piece of rooftop meant to cover it perfectly, hidden from their neighbors with matching wood compartments blessed with magic, so that they will not decay over time.

“Just a moment,” Sol tells Yohan, as he rushes toward the shed to fetch a large bucket that he deposits beside the garden’s personal well. Sol begins filling the bucket, yet he pauses once Yohan nears.

“Here.” From behind him, his beloved wraps his arms atop Sol’s shoulders. Yohan’s hands brush Sol’s knuckles. “Let me help,” he offers. And as much as Sol wants to do everything himself for the sake of being hospitable towards Yohan, he can’t deny the task will be much easier, not to mention quicker with two sets of hands.

Sol gladly accepts the help, with a *thank you* in the shape of a kiss he leaves atop Yohan’s lips.

The two of them work quickly in the night—Sol waits by the well to work its mechanisms that allow him to fill the bucket, whilst Yohan carries it back and forth, pouring said water into their bath. It isn’t long before the wooden basin is filled to its brim. Before they wade in, however, Sol holds a single hand before Yohan’s chest, urging him to pause. “It’s not ready yet,” he tells the knight, as he retrieves a familiar vial from his own robe’s pocket.

Sol tips the vial’s head downward then, once three drops have fallen, he pockets it again. “There!” he exclaims with a satisfied nod. “Purified and *almost* ready!”

“Almost?” Yohan tilts his head as he stares at the water. “Isn’t it...”

“What?” Sol turns to him, dusting off his hands against his cloak as he raises a brow at his beloved. “Don’t tell me you *actually want* to bathe in freezing cold water?” Sol searches his robe once more, he retrieves from his other pocket a different rounder vial, whose contents glimmer, infused by an otherworldly pumpkin light—this time, he dumps the entirety of its contents inside the basin and its waters.

The water glows the same shade as the ephemeral liquid for a brief few seconds until—*except for the fact that it is steaming now*—it returns to its initial state.

Yohan’s lips part. “Oh.” For a moment, he is speechless. “That’s... very convenient,” he mumbles whilst still observing the rising steam, in quiet fascination.

“Depends on who you ask,” Sol scoffs, as he quickly disrobes then discards his clothes to the wicker basket designated for their dirty laundry. “The

ingredients to make this potion aren't rare per se..." He strides towards the round wood tub, then dips a finger inside to test the temperatures. *As expected*, Sol thinks in satisfaction, *it is just right*. "But it does take me a good hour to concoct one—those types of brews are better made in big batches, 'else you're likely wasting your time."

"I... see." Yohan blinks as he inches closer to Sol, and the water. "What now? May I aid you with anything else?" he asks Sol.

Sol, who can only glance up at him and laugh at the rather endearing question. "You undress, dearest," he tells Yohan with an impish grin. "Bath's ready."

"Right..." Another flush spreads across Yohan's pale features. "Right." He clears his throat. "Of course," the knight hooks a palm around the back of his own nape, he remains this way for a moment, before he finally takes his armor off in turn. For someone of his caliber and size, Yohan is being very careful not to touch nor bump any objects out of place. The respect he has for Sol's home is endearing, truly, Sol learns something new about him everyday.

When Sol dips his toes into the water, Yohan is quick to follow him in.

Though one could claim it was a hassle to get this all set up, in comparison to the usual quick showers he would take back at the royal manor, Sol can't deny how much he missed taking baths—nothing beats laying back and feeling the tension in his muscles evaporate alongside the water's hot steam.

And it would seem Yohan feels the same, for soon the knight is throwing his head back, letting out a content sigh. "This is wonderful..." he whispers as he turns his half-lidded gaze to the stars. The heat flushes his cheeks a deep carmine, and Sol cannot help but smile as he watches his beloved wind down.

"Isn't it the best?" Sol chuckles as he reaches for his beloved's hand. He realizes it was silly to be nervous, and to even wonder whether Yohan would change his mind about living here, just because things are not as they were at the palace. *Of course, Yohan already knew that.*

Sol shuts his eyes to the sound of a light drizzle, which peppers the land in the ricochet of raindrops; they fall in a steady rhythm on the roof above. As Sol grins, he raises his fingers above the water in a steady motion, he makes a few firefly lights appear. The little round orbs circle around their figures and hover atop the water's surface, allowing them to better see into the night. "It's calming,

whenever you do that,” Yohan whispers, as he watches the simulated fireflies dancing in little waves around one another. “I love your magic, Sol.” Yohan squeezes Sol’s hand softly. “And the way it interacts with the world.”

His beloved’s words warm Sol’s heart. Sol pushes through the water’s weight with his arms as he inches closer to Yohan—before long, he is straddling the knight’s waist, peering down at Yohan who reaches upward, to thumb at Sol’s cheek. “How do you feel, my love?” he asks, and Sol knows he isn’t talking about the magic nor the bath.

He pauses for a moment. “Relieved,” he eventually admits through a huffed sigh as his shoulders drop, Sol relaxes into his beloved’s caring embrace. “However,” he bites into his lower lip and tenses again. “It went so well that I can’t help but wonder...if my luck might be on the verge of running out. What if it does not go as well with the other townsfolk? What then?”

Yohan reaches around to run his hand down Sol’s spine—the touch finds Sol shivering as the knight’s warmth envelops his spirit and body. “Don’t worry yourself, darling.” Yohan looks up to him in turn, his gaze full of hopeful promise. “I will be there every step of the way with you, and, so will your mentor.” He brushes the hair out of Sol’s eyes. “You needn’t face these sorrows alone.” He pulls Sol closer to him, then rests his cheek against Sol’s heart. “You have me, and I have you—remember?”

A sigh escapes Sol’s lips. “I remember...” He slips his arms around Yohan’s shoulders and returns the hug with a smile. “Thank you, Yohan. Life with you here is brighter already.” He kisses his beloved once, then reaches for the table near the bathtub, containing their towels and various soaps.

Sol presses a walnut of pine shampoo into the middle of his palm, then, he runs it through Yohan’s hair.

At Sol’s gentle massage, Yohan lets out a breathy groan and shuts his eyes.

The knight runs his fingertips down Sol’s nape.

And Sol relaxes in turn, and focuses on the feel of the knight’s touch, how Yohan dips his head forward then kisses his clavicles oh so sweetly. Sol presses his lips to the knight’s forehead with closed eyes, he holds Yohan’s face closer to his chest, and Yohan runs his tongue across his skin. “Your scent is intoxicating, my heart.” The low rumble of the knight’s voice has Sol biting his lip. “I want to taste you.”

They look to each other again. Sol's eyes flutter open, as he meets his knight's gaze, his hands cupping either sides of Yohan's jaw. "Then kiss me, beloved," he whispers.

And Yohan does.

They spend the remainder of the half hour washing each other in the baths, indulging in the warmth of the water that slowly ebbs away, until the rain finally lets out abovehead and they take this opportunity to go back inside.

Yohan and Sol tiptoe up the creaking stairs leading to Sol's old bedroom—never once does Sol let go of Yohan's hand.

Sol leads his knight into the room where he had dreamt of him for so long. It is surreal, *seeing him here*, now seated atop Sol's bed with only a towel to cover his waist.

Sol's face warms at the sight of him.

"Well?" Yohan asks him with a chuckle, as he stares back at Sol with that charming, tilt of his head. "Are you merely going to stare, my heart?" He offers his hand for Sol to hold. "Or will you join me, too?"

Sol finds his beloved's skin, their connection is as natural as breathing, as they tumble onto the bed together their towels fall away. Sol lays atop Yohan; it would be cold, if not for his beloved's body heat.

"Yohan..." Sol lowers his voice down to a whisper. With his head rested against the knight's chest, his gaze turned towards the wall, he locks their fingers together. "Take me."

Yohan brings Sol's knuckles to his lips, he mouths an almost-silent, "Yes," across Sol's skin.

Soon, Sol has rolled over, watching the ways in which the knight towers over him with loving fascination, his bottom lip caught between his teeth as he waits.

Yohan keeps Sol's gaze, never looking away once, he leaves a slow trail of kisses down Sol's neck and body—until he is mouthing sweet nothings between Sol's legs, pressing his lips into Sol's warmth.

Sol's eyes flutter shut at the heat and pressure of his beloved's tongue pushed against his cock, he grasps at his pillow from behind, his back arching off the bed. "Y-Yohan—"

By now, Yohan knows by heart, where he should suck and roll his tongue to bring Sol to completion. It only takes minutes before Sol is relaxing into his

beloved's mouth, his legs shaking as he pants the knight's name, then stares down at Yohan through eyes lidded wet with tears of pleasure.

Yohan is still holding onto his hand—*he has not let go, not even once*—and he continues to hold him through honeyed rapture as Sol comes, his thighs trembling around the knight's head. Yohan only kisses him more, against his most sensitive heat, and Sol's toes curl against the mattress. Yohan is being so especially loving, so gentle tonight—*he is simply melting*.

When Sol's breaths are heavy with the weight of Yohan's love, and he can do nothing but lay there in his afterbliss, Yohan shifts across the mattress until he is holding him in his arms once more. "Sol," Yohan whispers as he deepens their embrace and cuddles him closer. "*My heart.*"

Sol holds onto the knight's back and spreads his legs, feeling the warmth of Yohan's erection drag across the front of his pussy, he bites his lower lip and grinds down against his beloved's cock. "*F-Fuck.*"

As Yohan strokes Sol's head, the knight reaches down with his free hand to grasp at his own cock, that he guides toward Sol's entrance—soon, he is sinking into Sol. And Sol's lower lip trembles at the gentle stretch, the burning heat of his knight snug inside him. "*Gods,*" he is not sure how many times he has already said the word tonight, but Yohan's wet hard cock has his head spinning raw with fantasies of what is to come, each the more carnal than the last.

With this man, he would do everything, try everything—go to the ends of the world and back. Sol cannot do anything but trust in him, and surrender to the love he feels for Yohan.

Yohan, who brings him closer to his chest as he thrusts in him ever so slow and soft and *oh*. "*Oh—*" Sol whimpers as he embraces the knight tightly; he finds himself holding onto Yohan more than usual, as if he may truly wake from a dream if he were to let go.

He hears Yohan sigh, hot breaths against his shoulder, and the warmth of a single tear hits his skin. "I am so happy, Sol," Yohan whispers as he buries his face between Sol's armpit and chest, "to be finally here, living this life with you..." Yohan runs his lips across Sol's neck. "Only now, is it beginning to feel truly real. My love, you have no idea, how—"

"Me too." Sol wraps his arms around the knight's neck, and at the same time moves his hips in accident, the act earns him a small gasp from his knight's lips.

Sol runs his hand across Yohan's back, then kisses his jaw. "I'm so happy I can barely think." He wraps his legs around Yohan's waist. "*How can this be real?* I find myself worrying it isn't," Sol chuckles, "every few minutes."

The two of them are torn now, between the act of making love and holding each other, and hugging each other, as they laugh and kiss and revel in their joy. Sol's face hurts from smiling so much—still, he cannot help it. Not when this man is loving him like this; not when time is moving anew; *not when life is finally right again.*

Yohan presses his lips to Sol's eyelashes. "My love," he sighs with his big, strong arms wound around Sol in protection and fervent amor. "My heart," he smiles. "I love you." He threads his fingers through Sol's hair. "I love you."

And in the darkness the world has never been this bright—between their sweat-soaked skin, glowing orange under the flicker of candlelight in the room there is warmth, and they exist.

Finally, they exist.

They exist. They exist. *They exist.*

FIN

Thank you for reading To Wield The Darkest Night!

If you enjoyed this story, please do consider leaving a review to help other readers discover it!

To learn more about Beau Van Dalen's works visit:

<http://beauvandalen.com/>

To connect with Beau and stay up to date with his latest releases drop him a line at @BeauVanDalen on Twitter/X, Instagram, Threads, Goodreads and/or sign up to his newsletter to get notified about new books!

Acknowledgements

I want to thank you, the reader, for making it this far—this was a long one and I'm grateful that you chose to pick up *TO WIELD THE DARKEST NIGHT*, let alone read it until the end: thank you, it means the world.

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to think you were one of the first readers to review my first publication back in 2018 and that, many years and books later, you are one of the first readers to review this one as well; to every fellow author and artist I met all those years ago while I still actively wrote web-serials, your passion and resilience for your craft is contagious, even when it's been so long and many of us have taken different creative paths, it's inspiring to know everyone is still creating work they love, I'll forever be rooting for you; to all my patrons on Patreon for championing my work, it's been a joy sharing daily chapters with you, your support allows me to keep independently creating longer, more ambitious projects like these and I cannot thank you enough; to every reader who has ever donated, I hope life will always be kind to you, amid the many years spent as a writer who struggled to make ends meet, your donations felt like miracles, at that time I did not expect anyone to support a writer who was just starting out, but you did, and it truly made a difference, I will never forget your kindness.

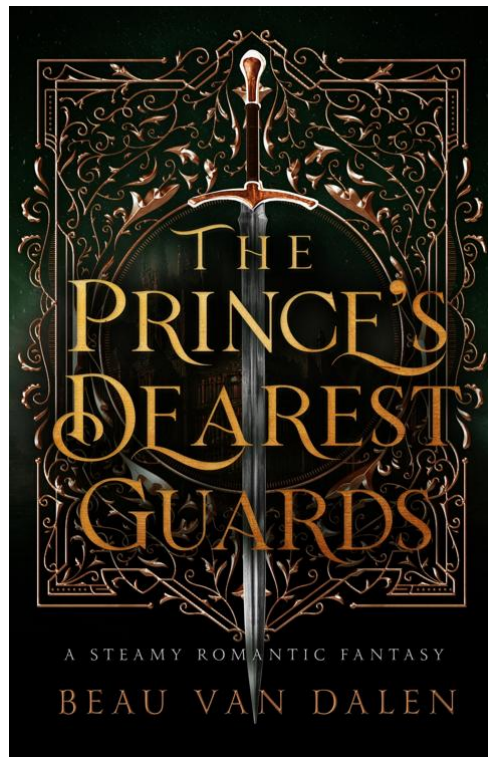
Finally, to every single reader who reads these books—whether it be this one or another—thank you for being here, you make this dream possible. Publishing trans books can be difficult in this industry, I have no words to express how grateful I am for the support you've shown and continue to show each new release, you have made me feel more accepted both as an author of queer works and as a trans person living in this world—thank you for everything, for existing, for bringing so much light into my life, and for believing in these books, *thank you*.



About the Author

Beau Van Dalen is a best-selling author of adult speculative fiction. Wattpad Stars Alumnus and Winner of Tapas Media's 2018 Summer Writing Competition—Beau's stories have amassed over two million reads online. Whether it be through books, poetry, comics or games, Beau is always enchanting words and creating worlds; he is currently on a journey to write one-hundred novels.

Also by Beau Van Dalen



The Prince's Dearest Guards

Prince Hal wants a boyfriend.

Sadly, he's much too shy to find any suitable partners.

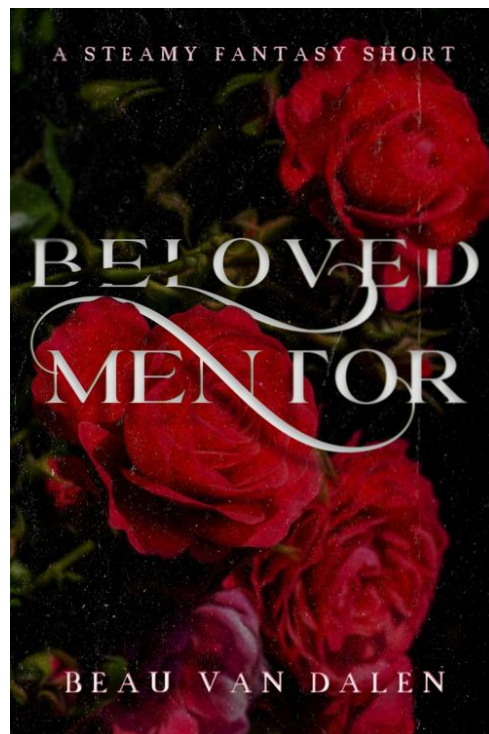
That is... until he meets his new guards.

On the day of his twenty-first birthday, Crown Prince Hal is introduced to two faithful guards, Elwood and Kaiser, who have been appointed to serve Prince Hal once his Highness becomes King.

As per his kingdom's coming-of-age traditions, Prince Hal and his new guards must set out on a journey together to slay a mythical creature lost in a faraway land—however, there's just one problem: nobody warned Prince Hal that his guards would be *so hot*.

And although Hal's guards are more than competent in battle, Hal wonders if he and his poor timid heart will survive travelling alone, alongside two of the most handsome men he's ever seen.

A steamy fantasy romance novella, featuring a trans man protagonist, who longs for amorous adventures with his dearest guards.



Beloved Mentor

Orphan Augustus enrolls in the Academy for Great Mages both to protect himself from villains looking to use his magic's potential, and in hopes of making a place for himself in society upon graduation.

However, days arriving at his destination, Augustus quickly realizes the Academy for Great Mages isn't quite what he thought it out to be. And after dealing with more harassment than he can take, Augustus turns to the only person he can count on for help: his mentor, Damien.

A short story about the bittersweet forbidden love between an apprentice sorcerer and his mentor in the arts, featuring an M/M romance and a trans lead.



Warrior Of Hearts - Book 1: ONLINE

At the age of twenty-one, Alex Winters has already repaid his student loans, gotten his own apartment, and become officially recognized as a rising artist to watch out for in the character design field. Everything is perfect, except it's not, because Alex is miserable.

To distract himself, Alex signs up to become a moderator for his favorite video game. He figures it shouldn't be too hard. He just has to answer a few questions, and that'll be that. But life loves proving Alex wrong. Because the first message he receives is: [she's not breathing, and I don't know what to do, because when my mate's parents get home they're just gonna find this girl on the floor and I know we don't know each other but you're the only one I can count on right now so please help me.]

Now, Alex is stuck chatting with David—an equally depressed medical student, who's coincidentally also the king of unhealthy coping mechanisms. When Alex realizes David also hates himself to a point of no return, what started off as an online joke slowly blooms into a genuine friendship between the two. So, it's all nice and wholesome. Mostly. Until Alex falls in love. Then, it gets complicated.